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Common Ground: Horticulture and the Cultivation of Open Space in the East End of London, 1840-1900

This thesis re-examines the characterisation of the East End of London as an area associated with poverty and urban degradation. It uses a wide range of sources to show that there was more open space and a greater interest in horticulture within the population than has hitherto been recognised.

Local newspapers, gardening journals and maps have been used to demonstrate that among East Enders were both amateur and professional gardeners. Amateurs gardened in backyards and window boxes, but horticultural expert Shirley Hibberd compared their flower shows favourably with those of the Royal Horticultural Society. There was a wide range of nurserymen and market gardeners supplying local individuals and the London markets. These industries have not featured in any discussion of East End employment. There were also open spaces which served many functions for the district. Victoria Park, the largest landscaped open space in the East End, provided both an example of horticultural excellence and also a site for recreation; cemeteries, in their early days, had ambitions to provide pleasantly landscaped surroundings in which mourners could find peace, though these ambitions did not survive the pressure of numerous burials; the small parks and gardens provided by the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association were an example of what could be achieved by the efforts of philanthropists who were anxious to help the poor at the end of the century.

This thesis argues that gardening should be recognised in historical debate as a pastime that was popular with all classes, not just the elite. It also suggests that most studies of the East End have underestimated the presence and importance of open space even in such an overcrowded and poverty-stricken area.

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Common Ground: Horticulture and the Cultivation of Open Space in the East End of
London 1840-1900

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Introduction

In 1894, Gus Elen, the popular Cockney music hall star, sang of his garden in the East End of London, in a song that is still occasionally heard today: ‘If It Wasn’t For the ‘Ouses In Between’, with the subtitle ‘The Cockney’s Garden’.¹ In the song, a costermonger has used his leftover vegetables to create the effect of “a puffick mass o’ bloom” in his backyard a mile from Leather Lane. In fact, in exactly the same district, at that time, as in most of the nineteenth century, there were gardens that would have been full of flowers. Today, however, more people probably know of Gus Elen’s fictional backyard than of those East End gardens and their gardeners. This thesis will endeavour to go some way towards remedying that situation by using a variety of underexploited sources to examine the horticultural community of the area and the gardens, parks and open spaces among which they lived.

The nineteenth century East End of London is not an easy area to define – but whatever definition historians have chosen, they have rarely associated it with horticulture and open spaces. Two quotations, one from the beginning of the period and one from the end, show how the built up area spread and the number of inhabitants grew.

In 1840, thirty thousand people signed a petition to be laid before Queen Victoria appealing for the creation of a park for the East End of London. They called themselves citizens of the Tower Hamlets. The following year, James Pennethorne, designer of the park, wrote a report that stated that

the Inhabitants of the Tower Hamlets constitute the entire population of the Metropolis Eastward of the City of London and the Borough of Finsbury, being altogether...400,000 – the majority of whom are densely located in the following parishes, viz.: St. Botolph Aldgate Without; St. John’s, Wapping; St. George’s-in-the-East; St. Paul’s, Shadwell; St. Mary, Whitechapel; Christ Church, Spitalfields; Mile End New Town; St. Matthew, Bethnal Green; St. Leonard’s, Shoreditch (including Hoxton); the hamlet of Mile End Old Town; the hamlet of Ratcliff; St. Ann’s, Limehouse; All Saints, Poplar (including Blackwall and the Docks).

¹ Music Hall Song “If It Wasn’t For the ‘Ouses In Between”, words by Edgar Bateman (London: Francis Day and Hunter, c. 1894).

He continued

the Parish of St. Mary, Stratford le Bow; St. John's, Hackney; St. Leonard's, Bromley, which include the villages of Hackney, Homerton, Upper Clapton, part of Stoke Newington, Stamford Hill, Old Ford and Bow (also within the limits of the Tower Hamlets)...may be considered in the country.²

At the end of the nineteenth century, writer and historian Sir Walter Besant put forward a different definition

all that area which lies east of Bishopsgate Street Without and north of the river Thames; I include that area newly covered with houses, now a densely populated suburb, lying east of the river Lea; and I include that aggregation of crowded towns, each large enough to form an important city by itself, formed of the once rural suburban villages called Hackney, Clapton, Stoke Newington, Old Ford, Stepney, Bow and Stratford.³

By 1900, according to Besant, the population had grown to approximately two million, and in only sixty years, a district of villages, open spaces and market gardens had been swallowed up by buildings, railways and factories. This thesis will broadly accept the definition of the East End put forward by Sir Walter Besant. It will not, however, consider the 'densely populated suburb' across the River Lea, the present-day Stratford East, because, as Besant suggests, it was 'newly covered' and, for most of the period it was not really a part of the East End.⁴

Nevertheless, despite the expansion, most aspects of the neighbourhood remained essentially the same. Indeed, the East End had been, from at least mediaeval times, the location for most of London's industry, outside the City walls, and the community that lived there was always predominantly working class. But, as architectural historian Millicent Rose writes 'the modern East End took shape in the early nineteenth century.'⁵ She goes on to describe how it was the building of the docks that came first, with the

² Victoria Park Papers, MBW/OW/VP/001, London Metropolitan Archives, London.

³ Walter Besant, *East London*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1901), p.4.

⁴ The phrase 'the East End' has been used to represent both the geographical area as described by Pennethorne and Besant and a more nebulous idea of a tight community of the working class poor. In the 1880s it became a 'sensationalist landscape', associated with crime and poverty in newspaper reports and social inquiries. (see Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London: Virago Press, 1994), pp. 193-194.). This thesis will use it in the sense of a geographical neighbourhood, while also considering the population who lived there.

⁵ Millicent Rose, *The East End of London*, (London: Cresset Press, 1951), p.124.

massive blocks of warehouses and rampart-like walls. Inland, there were the equally massive sugar-refineries and breweries, employers, as were the docks, of large numbers of labourers. Newer industries, even more polluting, such as chemical and dye works, and many others, found cheaper land further out towards Bow and Old Ford. The River Lea (known as Bow Creek on the stretch nearer the Thames) was soon bordered by such factories, all spilling effluent into the water and tainting the air.⁶ Prevailing winds blew – as they still do – from west to east, therefore preserving the areas favoured by the wealthy from the unpleasantness of smoke and fumes from increasingly obnoxious factories.⁷

There was little attempt at any kind of separation between factories and housing. Most workers, especially the dock labourers (many of whom had to attend every morning to see if work was available) and the factory hands, had to live within walking distance of their work and this led to families packed into poorly built new houses or rapidly decaying older ones.⁸ It was easy to move between lodgings and by staying in the same neighbourhood, even if it was overcrowded, one had the support of a known community.⁹

In the period covered by this thesis there was a large influx of largely poor migrant labour, drawn to the metropolis by the hope of finding work. There were two peaks, the first of Irish fleeing famine in the 1840s and 1850s and the second of Jews fleeing the East European pogroms in the 1880s and 1890s. P. J. Keating identifies both these periods as times which coloured middle and upper class views of the working class. ‘Both were times of social upheaval when real or imagined class fears compelled people to look afresh at the basic social, economic and political structure of society.’¹⁰ He suggests that the first period

⁶ Ibid., pp. 139-154.

⁷ Not that they escaped entirely, for in the Parliamentary Report on Smoke Prevention of 1843, (*Parliamentary Papers*, 1843 vol. vii.583, pp. 80-81) it is stated that smoke from the East End is harmful to plants in Regent’s Park, Chelsea Physic Garden and Somerset House.

⁸ Donald J. Olsen points out that until the coming of cheap workmen’s rail fares, there was no way that the poor could be rehoused in the suburbs, leading to inevitable overcrowding in the inner city. Donald J. Olsen, *The Growth of Victorian London* (London: Peregrine Books, 1979), p. 274-275.

⁹ This even applied in the case of a slightly better off worker, such as Henry Jacques, the shirtmaker, as discussed by Colin Pooley and Jean Turnbull. Colin G. Pooley and Jean Turnbull, ‘Changing home and workplace in Victorian London: the life of Henry Jacques, shirtmaker’, *Urban History*, 24 (1997), 148-178.

¹⁰ P.J. Keating, *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1971), p.3.

was dominated by concerns over the condition of industrial workers, predominantly in the northern towns, and by fear of the Chartists, and that the second was more concerned with London slums and the rise of Socialism.¹¹

Even during the first period mentioned by Keating, there were some accounts of the life of the poor in London which began to establish the stereotype that was to colour most subsequent views of the inhabitants of the East End. Descriptions of such neighbourhoods were usually written by outsiders, journalists who only went into them in order to seek out scenes of dramatic squalor, or by medical men concerned with the causes of disease. A typical example of the latter is given by Dr. Thomas Southwood Smith, chief physician of the London Fever Hospital, who went to Bethnal Green and Whitechapel in 1838 to report on conditions to the Poor Law Commissioners and noted disgusting open sewers and heaps of filth in front of houses. At this time, he suggests, Bethnal Green contained around 70,000 inhabitants and Whitechapel around 64,000. He described it as an area mostly occupied by pig dealers where ‘the filth produced by the pigs is seldom or never cleared away.’¹²

However, in June of the same year, one of the Assistant Commissioners who was reporting on the condition of the handloom weavers of Spitalfields, described Saunderson’s Gardens which were

situated on the east of Bethnal-green, and not above a quarter of a mile from it. They may cover about six acres of ground. There is one general enclosure round the whole, and each separate garden is divided from the rest by small palings. The number of gardens was stated to be about 170: some are much larger than the rest. In almost every garden is a neat summer-house, where the weaver and his family may enjoy themselves on Sundays and holidays...There are walks through the ground by which access is easy to the gardens. Much care is bestowed on the cultivation...some of the gardens had cabbages, lettuces, and pease [sic], but most of the cultivators had a far loftier ambition. Many had tulip-beds, in which proprietors not a little gloried, and over which they had screens which protected from the sun and from the storm. There had been a contest for a silver medal

¹¹ As will be noted in Chapter 3, one of the reasons given for the choice of location for Victoria Park in 1840 was that its creation would remove one of the main gathering places of Radicals in the East End.

¹² Thomas Southwood Smith, ‘Fourth Report of the Commissioners Under the Poor Law Amendment Act. Supplement 3’, *Parliamentary Papers* 1838 vol. xxviii.147, p.89.

amongst the tulip proprietors. There were many other flowers of a high order; and it was expected that in due time the show of dahlias for that season would not fail to bring glory to Spitalfields. In this neighbourhood are several dealers in dahlias.¹³

Dr. Hector Gavin in 1848 found many of the same problems as had struck Dr. Southwood Smith.¹⁴ Both men also found workers' houses with neat gardens, though this is a point that is often ignored by historians and the perspective that has gained ground is the one that gives greater emphasis to filth and poverty.

Throughout the period covered by this thesis, the East End was an area into which journalists and other writers, including Henry Mayhew, John Hollingshead and George Sims, ventured as if into a foreign country, bringing back reports of the natives to a public who barely knew anything about the men and women who lived there. It was the sensational and strange that struck the middle-class readers who were the main audience for this type of writing – the stories were so much more attention-catching than the accounts of hard and apparently monotonous lives lived by the majority of the East Enders which had been included even by Mayhew himself.

But not all contemporary accounts were so bleak, and by researching in lesser known sources it is possible to find writers who tried to draw attention to more positive aspects of life and work in the East End. In 1875, William Glenny Crory wrote a series of articles for the *East London Observer* which were later collected into a book.¹⁵ He was an Irishman who had already written accounts of industries in Ireland.¹⁶ He settled in England as a Presbyterian clergyman, but he continued to write for the newspapers. He investigated many of the wide range of industries that could be found in the area and gave

¹³ J. Mitchell, 'Reports from the Assistant Hand-loom Weavers Commissioners', *Parliamentary Papers* 1840 vol. xxiii.49, p. 218.

¹⁴ Hector Gavin, *Sanitary Ramblings, being sketches and illustrations of Bethnal Green* (London: John Churchill, 1848).

¹⁵ William Glenny Crory, *East London Industries* (London: Longmans, 1876).

¹⁶ William Glenny Crory, *A Treatise on Industrial Resources, Still Neglected, in Ireland: In Which the Manufacturing Powers of Ireland are Pointed Out, Their Value Estimated, And How to Work them On Purely Commercial Principles Fully Set Forth* (Dublin: M'Glashan & Gill, 1860); idem., *The Commercial Importance of Ireland's Industrial Resources* (Dublin: McGlashan & Hall, 1865); idem., *Industry in Ireland: A Treatise On The Agricultural Powers, Manufacturing Capabilities, and Commercial Advantages of Ireland* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1865).

details of about thirty different enterprises that were on a large scale, ranging from shipbuilding and railway maintenance to crinoline and corset making, and including the making of tallow and soap, India rubber, baking and confectionery and the building trades. He had the laudable aim of trying to counteract the many who represented 'East London as a place of degradation, wretchedness, destitution, immorality, and spiritual depravity.'¹⁷ Another religious leader, William Wakefield, remarked that the 'vast majority of the inhabitants [of the East End] live quiet respectable lives of hard work, and deserve no more to be called vicious or degraded than the inhabitants of Mayfair.'¹⁸ The Rev. Harry Jones, Rector of St George's-in-the-East, spoke out in defence of his parishioners against those who maligned the East End. He wrote in 1875 of well-meaning people who, seeking with the best of intentions to promote the welfare of the East End poor, 'have unwittingly brought undue discredit upon whole districts by setting forth their condition in the darkest colours.' This evil impression 'is in many respects exaggerated and injurious, and...is slow to pass away.' Jones felt that these 'zealous promoters...have done more harm by their pictures of assumed eastern depravity than good with the money collected from the public by means of harrowing appeals.'¹⁹ Seth Koven quotes James Adderley, at one time a resident of Oxford House,²⁰ who, according to Koven, 'blasted the 'provoking rich people' who arrived in East London so filled with literary preconceptions that actual slums were not nearly 'slummy enough' for them.'²¹ Well-documented degradation did exist, of course, but it was not the whole story. Nevertheless, it was the tales of squalor and violence that left the strongest impression on those who had never visited the East End.

¹⁷ Glenny Crory, *East London Industries*, p. xi.

¹⁸ Quoted in Robert Haggard, *The Persistence of Victorian Liberalism: The Politics of Social Reform in Britain 1870-1900* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000) p. 44.

¹⁹ Rev. Harry Jones, *East and West London: Being Notes of Common Life and Pastoral Work in Saint James's, Westminster and in Saint George's-in-the-East* (London: Smith Elder & Co, 1875), p. 204.

²⁰ Oxford House was one of the Settlement Houses, in which young Oxford and Cambridge men lived for short periods, hoping to give help and a good example to the poor of the East End.

²¹ Quoted in Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 6. Koven also discusses the confusion of motives which inspired young upper class men and women to move into settlements in the East End, in which a genuine desire to do good was mixed with sexual overtones both among the settlers, who lived in single sex establishments, and towards the young East Enders.

In his survey of East End industries, Glenny Crory had made no attempt to describe the smaller scale work done in the home, and his only reference to shopkeepers was to say that there were too many of them. It is from Henry Mayhew, who conducted his researches in the late 1840s, and Charles Booth and his co-workers forty years later, that we learn most about the lower ranges of employment that occupied so many in the East End. Yet the thousands who worked as weavers, shoemakers, cabinet makers and many other trades were a very important element in the population. The area was more diverse than many historical accounts have allowed for. There were even some of the comfortably-off, whose businesses meant that they had to live in the East End. Dr. Hector Gavin, member of the committee of the Health of Towns Association, who visited Bethnal Green in 1848 to survey it from the point of view of a medical man, while drawing attention to streets where there were signs of filth and lack of proper sanitation and sources of clean drinking water, also described some very pleasant areas, especially Whisker's Gardens which, like Saunderson's Gardens, was 'laid out, in neat plots, as gardens.' He continues that although the majority of the cultivators are the poor of Bethnal Green, there are a 'few gentlemen who likewise have their gardens here.'²² Few they may have been, but they did exist. In Poplar there were still merchants and dock officials of some status. Tredegar Square, off Bow Road, built in about 1835, was intended for middle-class, servant-keeping families, and it kept this character for at least the first fifty years of its existence.²³

Some historians have tried to give a more nuanced account of the East End. In 1951, Millicent Rose wrote her account of the area. In her preface she claims 'apart from the sensation-seekers, writers on London have almost ignored the East End. It hardly

²² Gavin, *Sanitary Ramblings*, p.11.

²³ Some of the protests at the setting up of the City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery, discussed in Chapter 4, came from the residents of just such houses.

appears in standard histories.²⁴ Hers is the first book to discuss the East End as a whole, its architecture, its culture and the way of life of the people, with sympathetic understanding. Charles Poulsen, local historian and Stepney resident, wrote a history of Victoria Park in 1976, and like Rose and the Rev. Harry Jones, argues that the upper and middle class visitors who described what they saw ‘with honesty and often with indignation...never saw the real life of the East End.’²⁵ In the same year, David Ward wrote a paper entitled ‘The Victorian Slum: An Enduring Myth?’ Although he was not referring exclusively to the East End, he suggested that it is incorrect to think of a slum as only housing the poor, for

although there were unquestionably concentrations of extremely destitute people often squatting on poorly drained land within the city or on the still undeveloped urban fringe, until quite late in the nineteenth century, far larger areas housed a mixture of lesser professionals, petty proprietors, master craftsmen, journeymen, laborers, and domestic outworkers.²⁶

These are the sort of people who would have been very likely to have had space for the cultivation of plants in backyards if not in small gardens.

In 1998, another Stepney resident, historian William Fishman, published his account of a year in Tower Hamlets, *East End 1888*. Although it is full of descriptions of overcrowded housing conditions and sweated labour, he also writes ‘[t]o portray the East End as one sombre mass of unmitigated woe would be a travesty.’²⁷ Hackney resident, historian Hilda Kean, in *London Stories* takes her own family history as a starting point for a much wider study of East London. Kean presents her work as a study which rejects caricatures of the neighbourhood as ‘either a melodramatic place of destitution, drunkenness and disease, or, equally sentimentally, a romantic cliché of extended

²⁴ Millicent Rose, *The East End of London* (London: Cresset Press, 1951), p. v.

²⁵ Charles Poulsen, *Victoria Park: A Study In The History Of East London* (London: Stepney Books and the Journeyman Press, 1976), p.11.

²⁶ David Ward, ‘The Victorian Slum: An Enduring Myth?’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 66 (1976), pp. 330-331.

²⁷ William Fishman, *East End 1888: A Year in a London Borough Among the Labouring Poor* (London: Duckworth, 1998), p. 303.

supportive families, jellied eels and sing songs round the piano.’²⁸ Sarah Wise has, by a close study of a variety of sources, shown that even the most notorious of East End slums, the Old Nichol (the Jago of Arthur Morrison’s novel *A Child Of The Jago*²⁹), does not deserve the unremitting ‘black’ of Charles Booth’s ‘street classification.’³⁰

It can therefore be seen that in the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries there have been those who tried to mitigate the impression of the East End as a place of total poverty and vice. But, as P. J. Keating wrote, that is the image that

survives little changed today...the product of a constant mingling of fact and fiction. It was the creation of Edward Denison, Samuel Barnett, Charles Booth, Walter Besant, Arthur Morrison, and Jack the Ripper.’³¹

Keating was writing more than thirty years ago, yet despite subsequent efforts to provide a more nuanced view, the stereotype is still potent.³²

In the emphasis that has been given to poverty and overcrowding, the history of open space in the East End has been ignored. In fact, apart from Victoria Park, it is barely mentioned by any historians. And yet, despite the factories and the houses, there was a surprising amount of open space in the East End in the nineteenth century. The Borough of Tower Hamlets covered approximately 9377 acres.³³ At the beginning of the period covered by this thesis, the northern section (basically Stoke Newington and Hackney) was, apart from development along the main roads, virtually all open land. The southern section was more developed in the part closest to the City, as can be seen from *Cross’s New Plan of London* of 1835, but nevertheless it too had large open spaces to the east.³⁴

²⁸ Hilda Kean, *London Stories: Personal Lives, Public Histories* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 2004).

²⁹ Arthur Morrison, *A Child Of The Jago* (London: Methuen, 1896).

³⁰ Sarah Wise, *The Blackest Streets: The Life and Death of a Victorian Slum* (London: Bodley Head, 2008). See Item 4 in folder: Charles Booth’s Descriptive Map of London Poverty 1889.

³¹ P. J. Keating, ‘Fact and Fiction in the East End’, in *The Victorian City: Images and Realities* ed. by H.J. Dyos and Michael Wolff, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 586.

³² ‘Jack the Ripper’ tours of Whitechapel still attract sizable crowds today, over a hundred years after the murders.

³³ *London Statistics vol.3, 1892-1893* (London: London County Council, 1893), p. ix.

³⁴ See Item 1 in folder.

The London County Council estimated the population in 1831 as 365,263.³⁵ Even as late as 1862, *Stanford's Library Map* suggests that not much more than half of the whole area had been built upon.³⁶ There was marshland in Poplar, there were other marshy areas in the Isle of Dogs, for industry there was restricted to the outer rim of the peninsula, there was the huge expanse of Hackney Marshes near the River Lea; there was Bow Common and Hackney Common and London Fields, and still much agricultural land northwards towards Stoke Newington. There were large areas of market gardens in Hackney even in 1862. On a smaller scale there were churchyards, burial grounds and cemeteries (to which the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association would turn its attention in the later part of the century). There were even a few garden squares.

At the end of the century, even after the enormous expansion in building, by totalling the acreage of the spaces under the control of the Parks Department of the LCC in the North East District (most of which is taken up by Tower Hamlets) it can be estimated that by 1897 there was still just over 731 acres of maintained open space there available for public recreation.³⁷ This thesis will consider the wide range of open spaces and the many different functions they performed and show how the unregulated spaces of the early part of the period were gradually transformed into the regulated ones supervised by the LCC.

The reign of Queen Victoria saw great changes in London's East End. As P. J. Keating pointed out, there were two great waves of immigration.³⁸ The growth in population encouraged a housebuilding boom. Changes in attitude brought about many social reforms which would have been unlikely earlier. This thesis has taken 1840 as its

³⁵ *London Statistics vol.2, 1891-1892* (London: London County Council, 1892), London Ratings p. 7. This is consonant with James Pennethorne's estimate of approximately 400,000 in 1841. By 1891, the LCC estimated the population of Tower Hamlets as 926,611. *London Statistics vol.3, 1892-1893* (London: London County Council, 1893), p. 633. Sir Walter Besant's estimate of two million for the population of the East End (see p. 2) only ten years later also included the 'densely populated suburb' across the River Lea, which was not part of Tower Hamlets.

³⁶ See Item 3 in folder.

³⁷ Lieut.-Col. J. J. Sexby, *Notebook of the Parks, Gardens, Recreation Grounds, and Open Spaces of London, with Maps Showing Each Place and its Surroundings, Compiled Under the Direction of Lieutenant Colonel Sexby, Chief Officer of the Parks Department* (London: London County Council, 1897), pp. 2-4.

³⁸ P.J. Keating, *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction*.

starting date, three years after Victoria came to the throne, because at that date a petition from the inhabitants of Tower Hamlets was the first move in the creation of Victoria Park and later in the decade the three important East End private cemeteries were opened. There are also few written sources of information about the local gardeners until the coming of local newspapers and magazines in the late 1840s and 1850s. It seemed appropriate to end the thesis at the end of the century, as there were few further developments in either horticulture or the provision or conservation of open spaces in the area in the first two decades of the 20th century.

By the use of a wide range of contemporary sources not typically exploited by historians of the East End, this thesis will continue the challenge to the stereotype of the area as a place devoid of green space occupied solely by an oppressed working class whose living spaces were far too overcrowded for them to think of horticulture in any form. A series of maps, from the late 1830s to the end of the century, show clearly the amount of open space that existed and how that space was gradually built over as time passed. Local and national newspapers, from the *East London Observer* to *Lloyds Weekly London Newspaper* and the *Times*, have yielded important information; the less well known gardening magazines, especially the *Gardener's Magazine*, aimed at ordinary gardeners rather than professionals, have proved especially helpful. Journals as well known as the *Illustrated London News* and as relatively unknown as the *Day of Rest* have also been used.³⁹ The archives of the Metropolitan Board of Works and the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association provide details of the setting up of Victoria Park and of the smaller parks and gardens. Memoirs and other writings have illuminated the motives of many involved in work in the East End. In this way, a broad range of views have been covered.

³⁹ *East London Observer* from 1857, *Gardener's Magazine* from 1862, *Lloyds Weekly Newspaper of London*, *Illustrated London News* and *The Times* throughout the period covered by the thesis, the *Day of Rest* 1865-67 and 1872-1882.

As well as considering the East End from the point of view of the amount of open space that could be found there, this thesis will argue that gardening played a part, to a greater or lesser extent depending on the individual, in the lives of far more of the inhabitants of the East End in the nineteenth century than is often realised, a topic that has barely been touched upon in any other literature. It is important to remember that one can ‘garden’ in a window box just as much as in a garden and even those living in the poorest courts often did so. Hilda Kean states that

[v]isual images of plants growing in East London homes certainly exist in public archives as well as family albums; they are not difficult to find. But they are part of a story that seems rather different from the more usual tales of the abyss and outcast London.

She points out that a much reproduced photograph of Providence Place in Stepney is usually used ‘to convey the idea of slums and poverty’, and the fact that it shows window boxes full of flowers at many of the windows is never mentioned.⁴⁰ Millicent Rose writes that in the large areas of workers’ housing the small houses were nevertheless provided by their builders with fanlights over the doors and brackets for window-boxes. Writing in 1951, she says that many of the streets Dr. Gavin visited still survive, but

the reformer had no eyes for fanlights, window brackets or ornamented parapets, yet these were an essential part of life in Bethnal Green. The builders only provided window-brackets because a high proportion of their tenants would want to keep their windows fragrant with wall-flower and mignonette or with that favourite among Cockneys of former days, the sweet-scented musk.⁴¹

Both Rose and Poulsen stress how much East Enders at the time they were writing still valued their little backyard gardens and how skilled they were at raising plants in difficult conditions. For owners in the nineteenth century, their gardens, however small, had many functions: they gave pleasure, a chance to nurture colourful growing things in an otherwise drab scene and for the most ambitious, as Chapter 1 will show, the satisfaction of competing against fellow gardeners in the local flower show.

⁴⁰ Kean, *London Stories*, pp. 103-104.

⁴¹ Rose, *The East End of London*, p. 166.

It is far more difficult to study nineteenth century working class gardening than elite gardening because there is no evidence ‘on the ground’, no surviving correspondence or society records such as those of the Royal Horticultural Society. What information does exist is scattered in many different sources, which makes it more difficult to collate and therefore for historians to use. But the evidence can be found. The study of gardening magazines addressed to a non-elite readership, notably the *Gardener’s Magazine*, edited by Stoke Newington resident Shirley Hibberd,⁴² and local newspapers such as the *East London Observer*⁴³, has uncovered a rich source of material which has not been exploited before.

There has been very little discussion of working class gardening in general, let alone in London, in any books on garden history, and not much more in the literature of rational recreation and leisure. Stephen Constantine wrote in 1981, ‘[l]ittle has been written about the history of popular gardening in Britain.’⁴⁴ Ten years later, in 1991, Martin Hoyles wrote, with justification, ‘Given the recent growth of the history of popular culture, it is surprising that English historians have not looked more closely at gardening.’⁴⁵ There have been only two articles in academic journals that have concentrated on popular gardening, both of which are quoted constantly and unquestioningly by later writers in their all too brief references to the subject. In 1980, S. Martin Gaskell wrote a paper on ‘Gardens For The Working Class: Victorian Practical Pleasure’.⁴⁶ He concentrated mainly on gardens provided by enlightened industrialists for their workers, mostly in the north, and to some extent on the provision of parks and other

⁴² A magazine entitled *Gardener’s Magazine* was founded by John Claudius Loudon in 1826 and ceased publication in 1843. The magazine referred to in this thesis, edited by Shirley Hibberd, began publication in 1862 and had several titles during its lifetime – *Gardener’s Weekly Magazine and Floricultural Cabinet*, *Gardener’s Weekly Magazine*, *Gardener’s Magazine*, *Gardeners’ Magazine*. It will be referred to throughout this thesis as *Gardener’s Magazine* as this was the name it held for the major part of the period discussed.

⁴³ First published in 1857.

⁴⁴ Stephen Constantine, ‘Amateur Gardening and Popular Recreation in the 19th and 20th Centuries’, *Journal of Social History*, 14 (1981), p. 387.

⁴⁵ Martin Hoyles, *The Story of Gardening* (London: Journeyman Press, 1991), pp. 5-6.

⁴⁶ S. Martin Gaskell, ‘Gardens For The Working Class: Victorian Practical Pleasure’, *Victorian Studies* 23 (1980), pp. 481-501.

open spaces. Stephen Constantine's paper, 'Amateur Gardening and Popular Recreation in the 19th and 20th Centuries',⁴⁷ traced the growth in popularity of gardening over the two centuries, but Constantine seemed to think it was an overwhelmingly middle and upper class hobby, despite his reference to 'popular recreation'. In fact, he virtually uses 'amateur' and 'popular' as synonyms when applied to gardening. However, in the nineteenth century this was not necessarily the case. There were various attempts to define 'an amateur'. Two quotations from successive editions of the *Gardeners' Chronicle* in 1858 showed how wide was the category: the first suggested that the real amateur 'with an occasional gardener is mainly indebted to his own energy and skill for the show he annually makes in his little garden'; the second states '[a]n amateur gardener...is one who pursues the art for the love of it...an amateur may be a rich man...he may have greenhouses and frames and keep a servant to assist him and be able to buy expensive plants' but he 'would rather attend to the cultivation of his domain, whether small or large, himself, than entrust it to others.'⁴⁸ It could therefore be argued that gardening enthusiasts as diverse as William Eickhoff, cabinet maker of Bethnal Green, and the Duke of Devonshire were amateur gardeners. In this thesis, the focus will be on the Eickhoffs of the gardening world as practical gardeners, though it will not lose sight of the fact that the middle classes were also enthusiastic in their approval of gardening as a pastime, both for themselves and for the working classes.

In 2001, Sir Roy Strong, then President of the Garden History Society, wrote in the *National Trust Magazine* 'Garden history and conservation have been over-obsessed with the grand – and the grandiose...What we must now turn our attention to is that most neglected part of our garden heritage – the urban garden.'⁴⁹ One student, Susanna Marcus, has attempted such a study. She submitted a dissertation in 1990 (as yet unpublished) on

⁴⁷ Constantine, 'Amateur Gardening and Popular Recreation', 387-406.

⁴⁸ *Gardeners' Chronicle*, 8 May 1858, p. 383; *ibid.*, 15 May 1858, p. 400.

⁴⁹ Roy Strong, 'Strong Medicine', *The National Trust Magazine*, 94 (2001), p. 34.

‘Town Gardens of London 1830-1914’ for the Diploma of the Architectural Association.⁵⁰

Marcus is more concerned with the designs proposed for villa gardens by professional writers and the actual plants that would have been used than with the gardeners themselves and their backgrounds. In 2001, Todd Longstaffe-Gowan published the first – indeed, to date, the only – major study of metropolitan town gardens, *The London Town Garden 1740-1840*.⁵¹ This volume gives a very detailed picture both of domestic gardens and garden squares in the more prosperous districts of London. Though the book is of great interest, Longstaffe-Gowan, like Marcus, is more concerned with the gardens of the middle and mercantile classes than of the working classes and in a period earlier than that covered by this thesis.

There are, of course, a growing number of books, both general and academic, on Victorian gardens, by, among others, Tom Carter, Brent Elliott and Jennifer Davies, but they do not deal with working class gardening. Tom Carter has made extensive use of the gardening magazines of the time to give an account of varieties of plants most commonly used, together with garden buildings and gardening methods. Brent Elliott gives a magnificent account of the important gardens of the time. Jennifer Davies wrote two books to accompany the television series on ‘The Victorian Kitchen Garden’ and ‘The Victorian Flower Garden’. Both these programmes and the (much more detailed) books focused primarily upon the work in an upper-class garden.⁵² Toby Musgrave has written on the head gardeners, some of whom were immensely influential figures in the development of horticulture.⁵³ There have been biographies of some of the main figures -

⁵⁰ Susanna Marcus, ‘Town Gardens of London 1830-1914: A Study of Domestic Horticulture’ (unpublished Diploma thesis, Architectural Association, 1990).

⁵¹ Todd Longstaffe-Gowan, *The London Town Garden 1740-1840* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2001).

⁵² Tom Carter, *The Victorian Garden* (London: Bell & Hyman, 1984); Brent Elliott, *Victorian Gardens* (London: Batsford, 1986); Jennifer Davies, *The Victorian Kitchen Garden* and *The Victorian Flower Garden* (London: BBC Books, 1991).

⁵³ Toby Musgrave, *The Head Gardeners: Forgotten Heroes of Horticulture* (London: Aurum Press, 2007).

John Claudius Loudon, Joseph Paxton, William Robinson, Gertrude Jekyll,⁵⁴ for example – but again these were either gardeners or garden designers working for the wealthy.

This thesis will contribute to the debate about popular culture and argue for a greater consideration of gardening as a genuinely popular recreation. Both Gaskell and Constantine were writing at a time when the study of popular culture was still comparatively new. As Emma Griffin points out ‘[i]n the 1970s, a new area of research opened up, unashamedly concerned with the kind of things that had previously been thought not to matter much.’⁵⁵ It was a time, she continued, when ‘history from below’ was making an important contribution to social history. However, it was often concerned with matters of class and with the development of political consciousness among ‘the people’. Stuart Hall, in a paper read at a conference in 1979, discussed the difficulty of defining ‘popular culture’. He felt it ‘would make little sense without reference to a class perspective and to class struggle.’⁵⁶ He concluded that ‘it is one of the places where socialism might be constructed and that is why ‘popular culture’ matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don’t give a damn about it.’⁵⁷ This is not the tone adopted by either Gaskell or Constantine – but given the prevailing interest in collective experiences that brought predominantly working class crowds together, such as the music hall or the football match, gardening was not a subject that was much explored. Although, as will be seen in Chapter 1, members of horticultural societies were ready to help each other out, there were no overt political references in any of their activities.

Social historians and historians of leisure have largely ignored gardening, and yet, in 1983, Keith Thomas suggested that ‘the cultivation of flowers is an historical

⁵⁴ Melanie Simo, *Loudon and the Landscape: From Country Seat to Metropolis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); Kate Colquhoun, *A Thing In Disguise: The Visionary Life of Joseph Paxton* (London: Fourth Estate, 2003); Richard Bisgrove, *William Robinson: The Wild Gardener* (London: Francis Lincoln, 2008); Sally Festing, *Gertrude Jekyll* (London: Viking, 1991).

⁵⁵ Emma Griffin, ‘Popular Culture in Industrializing England’, *Historical Journal*, 45 (2002), p. 619.

⁵⁶ Stuart Hall, ‘Notes On Deconstructing ‘the popular’’, in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. John Storey, 3rd edn (London: Pearson Education, 2006), p. 486.

⁵⁷ Hall, ‘Notes on Deconstructing ‘the popular’’, p. 487.

phenomenon of great importance to anyone concerned to know how the working classes would use their leisure and direct their emotional energies.’⁵⁸ In 1991, Martin Hoyles published *The Story of Gardening*, in which he stated ‘there is a kaleidoscope of cultural meanings attached to gardening.’⁵⁹ However in what is a broad and general study he was not able to follow this up in detail. The three volumes of the *Cambridge Social History of Britain* have no references to gardening.⁶⁰ Hugh Cunningham’s survey *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution*, though discussing the question of public parks, makes no reference to private gardening at all.⁶¹ Peter Bailey, in *Leisure and Class in Victorian England*, accords the subject four mentions; Ross McKibbin, in his chapter on work and hobbies in Britain 1880-1950, one plus a footnote.⁶² John Golby and Bill Purdue, in *The Civilisation of the Crowd* pay it rather more attention, pointing out the various reasons why it fitted in so well both with the developing home-centred culture of the middle classes and with the development of the suburbs.⁶³ Pamela Horn, in *Pleasures and Pastimes in Victorian Britain*, accords it a whole section – of six pages out of two hundred and sixty – but tries to cover everything from High Society garden parties to London window boxes and can therefore give only brief accounts of each topic.⁶⁴ Anne Wilkinson, in a thesis submitted in 2002 and later published in a much altered version, is alone in considering the development of gardening as a leisure activity in the nineteenth century.⁶⁵ However, her

⁵⁸ Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* (London: Allen Lane, 1983) p.240.

⁵⁹ Hoyles, *The Story of Gardening*, p. 8.

⁶⁰ *Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950*, ed. F.M.L. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁶¹ Hugh Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution c. 1780-c.1880* (London: Croom Helm, 1980).

⁶² Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control 1830-1885* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978); Ross McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain, 1880-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 139-166.

⁶³ John Golby and Bill Purdue, *The Civilisation of the Crowd: Popular Culture in England 1750-1900* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999), pp. 145-6.

⁶⁴ Pamela Horn, *Pleasures and Pastimes in Victorian Britain* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999), pp. 35-41.

⁶⁵ Anne Wilkinson, ‘The Development of Gardening as a Leisure Activity in Nineteenth Century Britain and the Establishment of Horticultural Periodicals’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Open University, 2002); idem, *The Victorian Gardener: the Growth of Gardening and the Floral World*, (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2006).

thesis is concerned to cover the whole country and does not explore the subject in relation to London, nor does it concentrate on working class gardening.

There has been very little done in the way of detailed research by those studying the pursuits of the nineteenth century working classes: was it perhaps because between the sixties and the late nineties gardening was not the fashionable subject it has recently become? Or was it too readily associated with the bourgeoisie and hence not part of the class struggle - which seems now to have been such a central interest of cultural historians in the sixties and seventies? In 2001, Jonathan Rose wrote of what he called the 'new social historians', and how they have tended to focus on 'the grittier or material aspects of working-class life - diet, housing, workplace culture, trade unionism, radical politics, crime, and family structure.'⁶⁶ Rose was writing of those who ignored the reading matter of the working-classes, but his comment applies equally to those who ignored their interest in gardening.

This thesis will focus both on gardening and on horticulture in a wider sense in the East End, as well as considering the position of open space in the area in the nineteenth century. It is divided into two parts: the first part demonstrates that there was a strong community of both amateur and professional gardeners in the East End in the nineteenth century and that they were heirs to a long tradition of horticulture in that part of London. Some of their gardens and nurseries survived until almost the end of the century. But until the middle of the century, there were no public areas in which the horticultural community could find inspiration and in which the whole population could enjoy the open air. The second part, therefore, considers the various open spaces of the East End, from Victoria Park, the largest landscaped open space in the East End, to the three main cemeteries, all of which had horticultural ambitions, and to the smaller garden squares and disused burial grounds which the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association took over and landscaped.

⁶⁶ Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001) p. 3.

East Enders could, of course, have visited open spaces outside the boundaries of the Tower Hamlets. Epping Forest was within reach for an outing, as was Hampstead Heath. So, indeed, were the parks of the West End, though their rules regarding decent dress were strict. There were pleasure gardens at the New Globe and the Royal Pavilion Gardens, North Woolwich.⁶⁷ Across the river they could have gone to the pleasure gardens at Rosherville near Gravesend, to Greenwich, or even Crystal Palace when it was moved to Sydenham. River trips could be made to Kew – as the members of the People's Palace Horticultural Society did in 1895.⁶⁸ But all of these were the objects of special excursions, involving planning and some expense, not just somewhere local where the children could be sent out alone to play, or adults could visit for an hour or so. It is for this reason that Victoria Park and the smaller gardens were so important to the people who lived near them.

The first two chapters of the thesis deal with men who gardened, both amateurs and professionals (very few women appear in the records). These chapters show how rich was the culture of both amateur and professional gardening and how skilled were the practitioners. Chapter 1 considers the amateurs, many of whom belonged to horticultural societies which had cross-class membership – from dock labourers to middle class men such as the editor of the *Gardener's Magazine*, Shirley Hibberd. No one has studied this important strand of East End life before.

Nor has there been any consideration of the horticultural industry of the East End. While it was obviously not as important as the dock work, the furniture makers or the clothing industries, nevertheless as Marc Brodie and Robert Haggard suggest, the East End was primarily a district of small masters, among whom the nurserymen would certainly

⁶⁷ *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper*, 15 July 1855, p. 10.

⁶⁸ *East London Observer*, 29 June 1895, p. 6.

have featured.⁶⁹ Gareth Stedman Jones, in *Outcast London*, under-represented the presence and importance of such men as these. Even in the new preface to the reprinted version of his book, in 1984, when he acknowledged that he had changed his position on several aspects of his original research, he stated ‘to my knowledge, no argument has been produced since [i.e. between the book’s first publication in 1971 and 1984] to challenge the importance I attached to casual labour, seasonal rhythms of production and consumption or the general character of the nineteenth-century London economy as a whole.’⁷⁰ However, some historians since, such as Brodie and Haggard, have come forward with new assessments.

Brodie maintains that ‘economic conditions in the East End were not as uniformly bleak as often portrayed. Most workers had relatively skilled and regular employment.’⁷¹ He goes on to discuss how some historians have misunderstood the work of Charles Booth and have over-emphasised the poverty of people in the East End in comparison with the poverty Booth found in the rest of London. Brodie also suggests that in *Outcast London*, Gareth Stedman Jones exaggerated the extent of casualisation and under-employment, and that this has been ‘extremely influential in historical perceptions of East London.’⁷² Robert Haggard maintains that some casualisation of labour was actually a good thing

[w]hat contemporaries and some modern historians have not taken into account is that the Metropolis – Britain’s busiest seaport and one of its most important manufacturing cities – was able to cushion the impact of any single economic downturn. The predominance of casual labour and small workshops in London militated against the heavy levels of unemployment that caused great suffering in many northern cities during the late Victorian ‘Great Depression’.⁷³

Chapter 2 will show that some of the East End nurserymen were substantial businessmen, with a national and even international trade. But there were many others

⁶⁹ Marc Brodie, *The Politics of the Poor: The East End of London 1885-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004); Robert F. Haggard, *The Persistence of Victorian Liberalism: The Politics of Social Reform in Britain 1870-1900* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000).

⁷⁰ Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the relationship Between Classes in Victorian Society* (London: Penguin Books, 1984), p. xvii.

⁷¹ Brodie, *The Politics of the Poor*, p. iv.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁷³ Haggard, *The Persistence of Victorian Liberalism*, p. 44.

who operated on a much smaller scale. In both cases, examples can be found of businesses that were passed down from father to son, in the same tradition as so many of the small businesses that dominated the nineteenth-century East End. Although not a major industry, nevertheless the existence of these horticultural enterprises have not been properly considered in studies of the East End. At least two of the nurseries employed large numbers of men – Hugh Low employed 61 men in 1851 and John Fraser employed 145 men and 8 boys in 1871.⁷⁴ John Harvey's study of early nurseries covers the entire country, beginning in the Middle Ages, and is only able to devote a few pages to the important East End nurseries of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁷⁵ He deliberately ended his researches in the early nineteenth century.

The market gardeners were also an important group until well into the second half of the nineteenth century. Peter Atherall noted that market gardens were widespread on the eastern fringes of London, but concentrated on the western districts,⁷⁶ as did Malcolm Thick in his study of the Neat House Gardens in Pimlico.⁷⁷ Although the spread of building drove most horticultural industry out of the heartland of the district, many men did not go out of business but moved outwards to areas east of the River Lea. This movement into Essex can be compared with the movement of the silk trade from Spitalfields to Braintree, as discussed by Hilda Kean and Bruce Wheeler.⁷⁸ In both cases, the industry did not disappear (at this time), it merely responded to changing economic and physical conditions and moved to a more favourable location.

Writers such as Brodie and Haggard have attempted to give a more nuanced view of the economic status of the East End. This thesis does not set out to be another in-depth

⁷⁴ 1851 Census TNA/HO 107/1503/177, p. 3; 1871 Census TNA/RG 10/1634/107, p. 20.

⁷⁵ John Harvey, *Early Nurserymen: with Reprints of Documents and Lists* (London: Phillimore, 1974).

⁷⁶ Peter Atherall, 'The Displacement of Market Gardening Around London by Urban Growth from 1745-1939' (unpublished M.Litt. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1976).

⁷⁷ Malcolm Thick, *The Neat House Gardens, Early Market Gardening around London* (London: Prospect Books, 1998).

⁷⁸ Hilda Kean and Bruce Wheeler, 'Making History in Bethnal Green: Different Stories of Nineteenth-Century Silk Weavers', *History Workshop Journal*, 56 (2003), p. 224.

study of the economy or the political state of the East End, nor does it propose a new analysis of the class composition of the population, but it does draw attention to important elements of the life of the district that have been hitherto unduly neglected and will thereby contribute to these more nuanced interpretations.

The next three chapters consider the various open spaces of the area, all of which were sites where horticulture was important. There is very little existing literature on this. As already mentioned, Charles Poulsen wrote a short account of Victoria Park in 1974. The only major study of Victorian parks, by Hazel Conway, mentions Victoria Park amongst a nationwide survey.⁷⁹ There is an account of Abney Park Cemetery by Paul Joyce.⁸⁰ The cemetery is also covered in *The Victorian Celebration of Death* by James Stevens Curl, but only as one among many. He also makes mention of City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery.⁸¹ Julie Rugg's thesis on the rise of cemetery companies deals with the whole country and does not even mention one of the East End cemeteries considered in this thesis.⁸² None of these studies makes much mention of the horticultural aspects of cemeteries, nor do they consider them in the context of the open space they provide in what became a heavily built-up area. H.L. Malchow wrote an important article on the work of the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association in which attention is given to its work in the East End, but there is no book devoted to the Association, or to any of the other open space societies.⁸³

It is clear that for the authorities in the nineteenth century, the major preoccupation concerning the provision of open space was the health of the population. From the Select Committee on Public Walks in 1833, the Select Committee on the Health of Towns in

⁷⁹ Hazel Conway, *People's Parks: The Design and Development of Victorian Parks in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁸⁰ Paul Joyce, *A Guide To Abney Park Cemetery*, 2nd edn. (London: Abney Park Cemetery Trust, 1994).

⁸¹ James Stevens Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2000).

⁸² Julie Rugg, 'The Rise of Cemetery Companies in Britain, 1820-1853' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Stirling, 1992).

⁸³ H.L. Malchow, 'Public Gardens and Social Action in Late Victorian London', *Victorian Studies*, 29 (1985), pp. 97-124.

1840, the Enquiry into the State of Large Towns and Populous Districts of 1844, the Reports of the Select Committee on Open Spaces (Metropolis) in 1865, to the beliefs of the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association as stated in the Aims of the Association every year from 1882, the emphasis was on health. Current medical theory until the last quarter of the century believed that much sickness was spread by a miasma in the air. There was a growing recognition that fresh air and outdoor exercise was vital for those who lived in overcrowded housing and spent their working lives in unhealthy factories and airless workshops. Much of the early support for the creation of open space in the East End sprang from the realisation that it was the potential source of disease which might spread to the wealthier areas of the West. And, as Frank Mort points out, sanitary and medical concerns were closely linked with moral concerns.⁸⁴ Thus to encourage the poor to get out of their cramped dwelling places and take healthy exercise in the open would not only help to prevent disease but would improve their morals as well.

Chapter 3 discusses the formation of Victoria Park, considering both the reasons that underlay its foundation and the horticultural excellence that it attained. As Hazel Conway put it '[p]arks were places where people could enjoy the open air and the beauty of the flowers and trees, and through a variety of activities become physically, socially and morally improved.'⁸⁵ Chris Otter also stresses the importance of appearance in public spaces: 'displaying collective self-control and mastery of visual codes was a vital technique through which gender roles and social position could be maintained.'⁸⁶ It was against this background that legislation to provide a park in the East End was passed without much opposition either in Parliament or in the neighbourhood in 1841.

The situation in the East End was very different from that described by Neil MacMaster in Norwich, where there was 'the battle for Mousehold Heath' between 1857

⁸⁴ Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England Since 1830* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), pp.13-61.

⁸⁵ Conway, *People's Parks*, p. 186.

⁸⁶ Chris Otter, *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain, 1800-1910* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 51.

and 1884 as the City tried to create a park out of a space that a local community had been accustomed to use for its own purposes.⁸⁷ Nor is there any comparison with the struggle that would take place for Epping Forest in the 1860s and 70s. In that case, the lord of the manor – who had purchased his rights from the Crown – wanted to enclose the land for development and tried to restrict the rights of local people to graze animals and to take fuel from the forest. The latter fought for those rights, soon supported by the Commons Preservation Society, and the Forest was eventually purchased by the City of London Corporation in 1878 and preserved as an open space, with free access for all.⁸⁸ The land needed for Victoria Park had never been used by the local community and the owners and leaseholders were bought out without much trouble. A public open space that had not been generally available before was created from fields and market gardens, which met with wide local support.

The result was, however, not a purely utilitarian construct. Denis Cosgrove suggests that landscape is ‘*simultaneously* a natural and a cultural space’, and that it veils ‘historically specific social relations behind the smooth and often aesthetic appearance of ‘nature’.’ He cites ‘[f]or example the serpentine lines of manicured pasture, copses and reflecting lake of the English landscape park obscure beneath their ‘lines of beauty’ a tense and often violent social struggle between common rights and exclusive property.’⁸⁹ Victoria Park certainly took some of its inspiration, as did all public parks, from the private ‘landscape park’, but it was not the result of forced enclosure. Nevertheless, underlying its natural beauty was certainly a moral purpose which arose from a particular view of the working class and the poor. The East Enders who flocked to it made it their own space by choosing how to use it – demanding a bathing lake or showing entrepreneurship by selling refreshments unofficially from the park keepers’ lodges. They also re-located the East End

⁸⁷ Neil MacMaster, ‘The Battle for Mousehold Heath 1857-1884: “Popular Politics” and the Victorian Public Park’, *Past and Present*, 127 (1990), pp. 117-154.

⁸⁸ *The Victoria History of the County of Essex, vol. IV: Ongar Hundred*, ed. by W.R. Powell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 114-116.

⁸⁹ Denis Cosgrove, ‘Landscape and Landschaft’, *German Historical Institute Bulletin*, 35 (2004), p. 68.

version of Speaker's Corner from its original place outside the park boundary to a new place inside the Park, where religious or political debates were enthusiastically entered into. As the chapter shows, there are no reports of rowdiness, however. The authorities no doubt viewed these meetings in the same way that similar ones held on Glasgow Green were seen in 1898 – as 'giving free course and comparatively harmless outlet to sentiment and opinions which otherwise might sometimes attain explosive force. It is a safety valve which should find a place in every great community.'⁹⁰

Chapter 4 considers three of the most important cemeteries in the East End. Health was also a major consideration in their creation. The appalling state of many of the burial grounds in London and other great cities had led, as early as the 1820s, to growing interest in opening private cemeteries where proper decency in the way of burials could be observed.⁹¹ They would be laid out like gardens with appropriate planting of trees and shrubs. Although cemeteries are not parks, in the nineteenth century they were certainly seen as places where people would walk for pleasure and education as well as places they would visit to remember the dead. John Claudius Loudon wrote

a general cemetery in the neighbourhood of a town, properly designed, laid out, ornamented with tombs, planted with trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants, all named, and the whole properly kept, might become a school of instruction, architecture, sculpture, landscape-gardening, arboriculture, botany, and in those important parts of general gardening, neatness, order, and high-keeping. Some of the new London cemeteries might be referred to as answering in some degree these various purposes, and more particularly the Abney Park Cemetery.⁹²

The fact that in this passage Loudon, a great garden expert himself, suggests that horticultural lessons, among others, could be learned in a cemetery shows how easily it was able to serve more than one function. But of course its main purpose would always be to serve as a place to memorialise the dead and this thesis shows how the very poor were just as eager to do this as were the middle classes. The founders of these private

⁹⁰ Quoted in Conway, *The People's Parks*, p. 189.

⁹¹ James Stevens Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2004), pp. 41-45.

⁹² John Claudius Loudon, *On the Laying Out, Planting, and Managing of Cemeteries and on the Improvement of Churchyards* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, 1843; repr. Redhill: Ivet Books, 1981), pp. 12-13.

cemeteries intended from the beginning that they would be open for burial to all, though the types of graves available were carefully graded by price and would therefore set boundaries as to who would be interred in the various sections of the cemetery. The chapter will explore the tensions that developed between aesthetic and economic concerns as the cemeteries filled up.

Chapter 5 takes the story on to the second half of the nineteenth century when there were beginning to be movements to preserve what open spaces were left from the rapid growth of London. The first to be formed was the Commons Preservation Society, in 1865. It was followed by the Kyrle Society in 1875. The focus of this thesis is upon the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association, founded by Lord Brabazon (who became the Earl of Meath on the death of his father in 1887) in 1882. This Association concentrated on providing playgrounds and gardens for the poor, often taking over disused burial grounds to do so. Lord Brabazon was again motivated by the concern for health and morals that has been pointed out as being so important in all aspects of the open spaces of the East End. In addition to proper provision for adults, he believed that the health of the nation's children should be a major consideration and therefore the Association supported the provision of playgrounds with gymnastic apparatus and an instructor available free to all. Lord Brabazon was an active philanthropist and a determined lobbyist, using all his prestige as a member of the House of Lords to advance the cause. A smallish core of committed members achieved much in the East End with patient persistence. They did not, however, seek to involve the active participation of those they hoped to benefit. It was very much a top-down movement and the Minutes of the Association do not show that the East Enders played any part in suggesting what the gardens and playgrounds should contain – unlike their input into Victoria Park and the cemeteries. Nevertheless, the Association's efforts made available many smaller spaces closer to the houses of those who did not wish or were not able to make the journey to Victoria Park and they certainly

helped to prevent yet more building in an area that was in great need of whatever open land remained. H.L. Malchow wrote of the upper and middle class membership of the Association in words that could well also apply to all those who came together to create or preserve open spaces in the East End of London

Presumably they found, in the general atmosphere of social apprehension over the danger of the slum and its residuum, common ground in the concept and exercise of “social citizenship”.⁹³

This thesis concludes that there was a far wider involvement with various aspects of horticulture in the East End of London than has hitherto been recognised. By considering ‘gardening’ in its widest sense, from the private efforts of the residents of courts and alleys in window boxes and pots to the public glories of Victoria Park and the commercial success of the market gardeners and nurserymen, the thesis sheds new light on an important aspect of nineteenth century culture.

⁹³ Malchow, ‘Public Gardens and Social Action in Late Victorian London’, p. 114.

Chapter One:
The Men Who Gardened: Amateurs

PHOTOGRAPH DELETED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS

A London Gardener c. 1890: from exhibition 'Faces in the Victorian City: Photographs of People Who Worked In the City Of London'. Guildhall Library, London, 2008, source unknown.

Introduction

There has been very little written about the whole question of the amateur gardener in the nineteenth century, particularly the working class gardener. The two pioneering articles in the early 1980s already referred to, by S. Martin Gaskell and Stephen Constantine, considered the question of gardens and the working class. S. Martin Gaskell subtitled his article 'Victorian Practical Pleasure', and was concerned to show that middle and upper class writers thought that as well as improving the health and the morals of working men, their gardens could provide a useful supplement to the family diet.⁹⁴ This seems not to have been relevant to the East End backyard gardens, which would have been far smaller than any of the cottage gardens provided by enlightened industrialists in the northern towns which Gaskell studied. The first sentence of Stephen Constantine's article 'Amateur Gardening and Popular Recreation in the 19th and 20th Centuries' - '[l]ittle has been written about the history of popular gardening in Britain'⁹⁵ – is almost as correct today as it was when written more than twenty-five years ago. However, he also states '[a]lthough the number of gardens and amateur gardeners increased considerably in the 19th century, the evidence overwhelmingly shows that as a recreational activity gardening was limited almost exclusively to the rural and urban elites'⁹⁶, and this is much more debatable. Indeed in 1884, the newly-founded magazine *Amateur Gardener* stated that

our horticultural literature tells a tale of some interest. It proves that horticulture is the favourite pursuit of the masses, but is not in highest favour with the wealthy and the powerful...Gardening is in an especial manner the pastime of the people.⁹⁷

Constantine acknowledges that there 'were attempts to encourage gardening among the urban and rural masses', but seems to think that they ran up against

⁹⁴ Gaskell, 'Gardens for the Working Class', pp. 479-501.

⁹⁵ Constantine, 'Amateur Gardening and Popular Recreation', p. 387.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 388.

⁹⁷ *Amateur Gardening*, 17 May 1884, p. 25.

substantial obstacles...that few working people had the leisure for gardening after a day's work was perhaps the least of them. In the towns a smoky polluted atmosphere was another discouragement. But the principal problem was the character of most housing development in the 19th century.⁹⁸

As this chapter will show, Constantine was wrong – many working men were keen to garden and were not put off by their long working days or the pollution of the atmosphere in areas such as the East End of London.

Anne Wilkinson's thesis on the development of gardening as a leisure activity in the nineteenth century and the associated growth of horticultural magazines suggests that both Gaskell and Constantine were too restricted in the material they considered, because, like other researchers on gardening subjects, they were over-reliant on the easily accessible *Gardeners' Chronicle* (founded by John Lindley in 1841), a magazine primarily addressed to professional gardeners and their upper-class employers.⁹⁹ She also maintains that Constantine misunderstood the nature of 'the amateur gardener' in the nineteenth century.¹⁰⁰ Wilkinson suggests in the conclusion of her thesis that 'the evidence of amateurs' gardens is to be found in the gardening magazines of the nineteenth century'¹⁰¹ and also that 'there is absolutely no excuse for claiming that evidence is hard to find. It is simply a matter of reading what is there.'¹⁰²

If one does not restrict oneself to the *Gardeners' Chronicle*, there is much information about working class gardeners in other gardening magazines, such as the *Floral World and Garden Guide* (founded in 1858) or, especially, the *Gardener's Magazine* (founded in 1862). But it is not only in them that evidence can be found, especially after the middle of the century. Martin Hewitt drew attention to the usefulness

⁹⁸ Constantine, 'Amateur Gardening and Popular Recreation' p. 390.

⁹⁹ Wilkinson, 'The Development of Gardening', p. 13. Wilkinson points out that until recently the *Gardeners' Chronicle* was the only nineteenth century gardening magazine available on the open shelves at the Library of the Royal Horticultural Society. Constantine does mention other magazines in his article, but seems to disregard the evidence they provide for the existence of working class gardeners, believing that they were overwhelmingly addressed to middle class readers.

¹⁰⁰ Wilkinson, 'The Development of Gardening', p. 2.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 152.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 158.

of newspapers in uncovering working class attitudes to political and economic matters, and wrote '[i]t is becoming ever more apparent that extensive digging can turn up a wide variety of useful sources'.¹⁰³ *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper*, for instance, a Sunday paper founded in 1842, which had a wide readership among the working classes, ran a gardening advice column from 1852. Hewitt also suggested that authentic opinions of otherwise anonymous working class people can sometimes be found in the correspondence columns. This is equally relevant to insights into their attitudes about gardening. By examining such sources, it has been possible to unearth information about the East End gardeners themselves, about the places in which they gardened and the ways in which their hobby enriched their lives.

The Gardeners and Their Gardens

It is impossible to estimate just how many of the small East End houses had gardens, or back yards, where they could have growing plants. As will be seen later in the chapter, some had enough space to accommodate a greenhouse. Some had small front gardens. Others had to make do with a few straggling specimens in a small patch of earth at the back of the house. Those without even that much space could still have a colourful windowbox or even a pot plant.

This thesis, concentrating as it does on the East End of London, will not consider the cottage gardens or allotments which were more likely to be found in more rural settings. As stated in *Breaking New Ground*, 'until the late 19th century, there was no 'allotment movement' as such in urban areas...Most allotments known from London in this period were in the outer suburbs or settlements soon to be absorbed into them'.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Martin Hewitt, *The Emergence of Stability in the Industrial City: Manchester, 1832-67* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1996), p. 194.

¹⁰⁴ Jeremy Burchardt, 'The FACHRS Allotments Project: summary and conclusions', in *Breaking New Ground: Nineteenth-Century Allotments From Local Sources*, ed. by Jeremy Burchardt and Jacqueline Cooper, (Milton Keynes: FACHRS Publications, 2010), pp. 22-23.

Elizabeth Anne Scott's study of allotments in the East End, which concentrates on a period later than that covered by this thesis, shows that this form of cultivation only became widespread there at the end of the century. She confirms the argument of Jeremy Burchardt, in *Breaking New Ground*, that in the case of London, the majority of plots were in the outer suburbs. She describes allotments in East and West Ham, and on the Isle of Dogs, not in the inner areas of the East End considered in this thesis.¹⁰⁵

Newspapers and magazines show that there was a widespread interest in gardening among the working classes, including those of the East End. George Glenny, horticultural journalist and expert on florists' flowers, was the author of *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper's* gardening column – which 'qualifies him as the first gardening columnist in a general newspaper'.¹⁰⁶ Though not a member of the working classes himself, he seems to have identified with their interest in gardening and most of his columns cater for working class gardeners as much as for the middle classes. He wrote of the paper in 1863 'We believe that LLOYD'S WEEKLY LONDON NEWSPAPER has done more to promote the love of gardening among the industrial classes than all the other papers and periodicals together'.¹⁰⁷ The column mostly consisted of practical advice to growers who would be doing the work themselves and were not trained, professional gardeners. Glenny lived in Fulham, but was a regular judge at the Tower Hamlets flower shows. He presided at the first Annual Dinner of the Tower Hamlets Chrysanthemum Society in November 1859,¹⁰⁸ and in the course of his speech he said that though he had been connected with floriculture since 1832, it 'had never made such progress among the people as within the last 18 months' and he put this down to the chrysanthemum. He continued that he knew of the existence of at least 30 chrysanthemum societies. A year before, a fellow guest at the

¹⁰⁵ Elizabeth Anne Scott, 'Cockney Plots: Working Class Politics and Garden Allotments in London's East End, 1890-1918' (unpublished MA thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 2005).

¹⁰⁶ Wilkinson, 'The Development of Gardening', p. 109.

¹⁰⁷ *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper*, 9 August 1863, p. 11.

¹⁰⁸ In 1860, the Chrysanthemum Society changed its name to the Tower Hamlets Amateur Floricultural Society and began to hold a summer show with a far wider range of plants being shown.

dinner, Samuel Broome, Head Gardener of the Inner Temple, famous for his displays of the flower there, had told the Social Science Congress that he already belonged to ‘twelve floral societies, numbering from fifty to a hundred members each’.¹⁰⁹

At the Tower Hamlets dinner, Broome said that ‘the chrysanthemum was the only flower the working man could successfully cultivate without an expense beyond his means’.¹¹⁰ A possible reason why this should be so is indicated in *The Town Garden* by Shirley Hibberd. He writes that the chrysanthemum is ‘*par excellence*, the London flower, and is nowhere in the world grown to such perfection as in and about the metropolis’. He suggests it is ‘a plant which defies smoke and dust, and bears confinement with less hurt to its constitution than any decorative plant we have; and its beauty, when fairly developed, is not surpassed even by the rose itself’. He suggests that it can be cultivated in borders with minimal care ‘plenty of water overhead, the frequent use of liquid manure, and a good loamy soil are the only conditions necessary to the cultivation of the chrysanthemum’. In addition it is very easy to take cuttings – he states that he himself grows ‘about a thousand in pots every year, to use in masses as soon as the bedders are taken up’. It is possible to produce suckers from the original plant over the winter ‘every old stool will, in spring, furnish from a dozen to twenty of these already well rooted’.¹¹¹ Twenty years later he was more succinct ‘all that it requires as a border flower may be summed up in fourteen words: Plant in a good soil and keep the plants securely staked from the first. All other matters are supplementary rather than necessary’.¹¹² Of course, to produce show quality blooms, more care has to be taken, especially to preserve the flowers from frost or rain damage (see below).

¹⁰⁹ *Transactions of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science*, 1858, p. 643. Probably not all of the societies were in the East End, but it gives some idea of the likely membership of the East End societies.

¹¹⁰ *East London Observer*, 10 December 1859, p. 3.

¹¹¹ Shirley Hibberd, *The Town Garden: A Manual for the Management of City and Suburban Gardens*, 2nd edn (London: Groombridge, 1859), pp. 121-124.

¹¹² Shirley Hibberd, *The Amateur's Flower Garden: A Handy Guide to the Formation and Management of the Flower Garden and the Cultivation of Garden Flowers* (London: Groombridge, 1878), p. 112.

The flower was just as popular at the end of the century. *A Gardeners' Chronicle* reporter in 1891 noted the formation of a new Floricultural and Chrysanthemum Society, of which 'the officers and committee are all working-men, managing their own affairs in their own way'. There were 110 members, paying half a crown a year, most of whom were cabinet makers. Many of them had small greenhouses in the back garden in which they grew their plants, some of which were

very homely structures, with means of artificial heating set up in a rough-and-ready fashion...It is during their leisure hours – generally after the day's labour is over, that time is found in which to give attention to the plants. One member informed us that he worked fourteen hours per day, and found refreshment from labour in attending to the few subjects he grows.¹¹³

Martin Hoyles has written

[t]here have always been gardeners who have gardened for themselves and their families, without constraint or orders, uniting design and planning, labour and consumption, although not always ownership. The history of cottage gardens and allotments shows how labourers can spend a whole day doing harsh physical work and still have the energy and enthusiasm to garden in their own time.¹¹⁴

This applies equally well to the East Enders who only had a back yard and a greenhouse. They were prepared to make considerable efforts to cultivate their prize-winning flowers and were very skilled at doing so.

In 1860 Broome described how many such men who were

ardent cultivators in London...succeed very well in preserving their show flowers from the frost by extremely simple means. It is their practice to erect temporary frames, and procuring a quantity of rush-lights, stick them up all over the frames, to burn through the night; this serves very well to exclude frost, as a substitute for a fire, where the party is unable to afford building a flue, or the expense of hot-water pipes. Others procure inch-bored zinc pipe, put up a one-quart boiler, and heat the whole with a small oil-lamp; indeed, many are the expedients and cheap inventions resorted to in order to prepare and preserve their productions for the show table, and in all cases they succeed, so much so as to surprise everyone.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ *Gardeners' Chronicle*, 29 Aug 1891, pp. 22-23.

¹¹⁴ Martin Hoyles, 'The Garden and the Division of Labour', in *Vista, The Culture and Politics of Gardens*, ed. by Tim Richardson and Noel Kingsbury (London: Frances Lincoln, 2005), p. 33.

¹¹⁵ Samuel Broome, 'Chrysanthemum Culture', *Gardener's Magazine*, 2 Jan 1860, p. 3.

Improvisation on quite a different scale was described in 1862 by Nathan Cole, a nurseryman from St. John's Wood, later Head Gardener of Kensington Gardens, who was another frequent judge in Tower Hamlets

I have just seen one of the finest collections of large and pompone Chrysanthemums which I believe is anywhere to be found in or near London, in the garden of Mr. Charles Parker, at Bow.¹¹⁶ Some time since the kind and good Rev. – Pocock allowed a few growers to appropriate a piece of ground at the back of the Alfred School-house, in Bow-road, and there Mr. Parker has built himself a lean-to greenhouse 35 feet long, which is now occupied by his beautiful plants brought in from the open ground to open their blooms unhurt in readiness for the Tower Hamlets Chrysanthemum Show.

In the course of the same account, Cole raised a question that concerned even those who most approved of gardening as a suitable recreation for the working man. The quotation is given at length as it not only presents the problem but also allows a personal response from a 'working man' – of which there are relatively few in the available sources

I asked Mr. Parker if his fancy interfered with his proper enjoyment of the Sabbath-day's rest. It is by some supposed that plant-growing takes up so much time that, when Sunday comes, a working man must be too busy out of doors to be in any other way engaged. Mr. Parker said he felt certain that no plant-grower need toil on Sundays; he might rest on his day of rest, and have the instruction and refreshment needful to fit him for the duties of the week. He would be the last to look with carelessness on the blessed institution of the Sabbath; and his plants would prove that, though he left them to themselves when Sunday came, they were none the worse for it. "Now," said I, "if you do not work at them on Sundays, and you are busily engaged all the week, how do they get the attention they require?" He said, "I do as many other working men do; after I come home at night, I amuse myself among my plants. I am generally occupied in training, stopping, watering, and so forth, till late at night with my lamp." Looking up, I saw the lamp, and I congratulated my friend that he 'burnt the midnight oil' to better purpose than some people.¹¹⁷

Shirley Hibberd obviously felt the same about the proper use of the Sabbath, for he criticised what he called 'an objectionable clause' proposed by the Social Brothers' Amateur Dahlia Society – formed by thirteen working men in Bethnal Green, 'who grow at

¹¹⁶ Pompone chrysanthemums are smaller than other types of chrysanthemum, sometimes almost globular in shape. They were always shown in separate classes from the large varieties. The modern spelling for this type of chrysanthemum is 'pompon'.

¹¹⁷ *Gardener's Magazine*, 3 Nov 1862, p. 346.

the back of the houses they live in’¹¹⁸ – which stated ‘that the members of this society show on the second Monday in September, and that each member shall meet at the society’s house the *Sunday* previous to the day of the show, to assist in setting up the decorations’. Hibberd felt ‘that the room would be better not decorated if it cannot be done on some other day’ and ‘that while such a law exists it will be likely to prevent persons joining the society who would prove very desirable members’.¹¹⁹ This demonstrates how gardening was caught up in the questions of respectability and different interpretations of what constitutes respectable behaviour, issues that will reoccur in the course of this thesis during discussion of Victoria Park and the cemeteries.

Until the very end of the period covered by this thesis, it is correct to speak of ‘men’ who gardened – at least when referring to those who took their hobby seriously enough to join gardening societies and participate in shows. There were at least five important floricultural societies in the East End, all founded and run by local, working class, men. The *East London Observer*, the earliest of the East End newspapers, founded in 1859, regularly reported on the activities and shows of these societies (as did other local newspapers, founded in the 1860s, and some of the national gardening magazines). The lists of classes and winners are given in great detail. All the winners of classes concerned with the actual cultivation of plants are men. Women only appear as winners in the classes for flower arranging and, judging by the surnames, are either the wives or daughters of the male winners. There is no reference to any woman attending the monthly lectures that some of the societies arranged. The reports of the convivial Annual Dinners of the societies, almost invariably held in a public house - as were the shows - prove that they were all male affairs.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ *Gardener’s Magazine*, 3 Oct 1863, p. 313.

¹¹⁹ *Gardener’s Magazine*, 1 Aug 1863, p. 243.

¹²⁰ For example *East London Observer*, 10 Dec 1859, p. 3; *Glenny’s Garden Gazette*, Jan 1862, p. 82; *Glenny’s Garden Gazette*, Dec 1862, p. 208.

The first open acknowledgement in the gardening press that women might have had any input into the gardening efforts of the men who exhibited is only to be found in 1894. The *Gardeners' Chronicle* reported on the first summer show held by the Horticultural Society of the People's Palace in Mile End. As well as the usual classes for individual plants, it offered prizes for the best kept gardens, for which fourteen were entered. The first prize was won by Mr. Nicholls, who lived in Lichfield Road, Bow and worked as a warehouseman in the City for ten hours a day. According to the *Gardeners' Chronicle* it was 'a delightful back garden, with a small greenhouse or two, admirably kept, ferns and flowering plants alike in rude health'. The magazine also drew attention to the support of Mrs. Nicholls: 'probably a good deal of the success is due to the care bestowed on the garden by the competitor's wife during his absence in the city'.¹²¹ The following year, the *Gardener's Magazine* acknowledged 'that the wife is often as keen a gardener as the male head of the family'.¹²² Nevertheless, the overwhelming number of winners were still men. The People's Palace Horticultural Society held a series of lecture meetings in 1895, the usual attendance at which numbered about 200, and the *Gardener's Magazine* commented '[o]ne of the most pleasing features about these lectures is the large numbers of both sexes who attend them'.¹²³ Increasingly this was an activity which could be openly shared by both men and women, perhaps because it was held in a lecture hall, not a public house. It also fits in with women's more public enjoyment of leisure at the end of the century. As the *Gardener's Magazine* also noticed 'These East End gardeners are all keen and enthusiastic, eager to learn and willing to be taught'.¹²⁴

It is, of course, possible that throughout the period East End women (and men) had been gardening, tending potted plants or balcony window boxes such as those in the photograph discussed in the Introduction, with no intention of entering a flower show

¹²¹ *Gardeners' Chronicle* 7 July 1894, p. 20.

¹²² *Gardener's Magazine* 16 Nov 1895, p. 739.

¹²³ *Gardener's Magazine* 15 June 1895, p. 365.

¹²⁴ *Gardener's Magazine* 9 Feb 1895, p. 85.

competition. It is difficult to make an accurate estimate of exactly how many households would have made such efforts, but there are indications in publications and in experiences detailed both in the East End and in other parts of London that such small scale gardening was a very important aspect of working class horticulture in nineteenth century London and that a large number of people would have had a potted plant at the very least. In 1860, a Bloomsbury clergyman, who went on to found the Window Gardens For the Poor and Clean and Tidy Rooms movement, which was enthusiastically taken up by clergy in the East End, had 'noticed the care and attention which some of them [his poorest parishioners, many of whom were women] bestowed upon a few window plants in the summer'.¹²⁵ It is clear that he was aware that keeping flowers was nothing new for them, as he also wrote '[t]he fondness with which the poor have ever cultivated flowers in their dismal, dark, dirty rooms, long before any such incitement or encouragement as a flower show was thought of is very instructive'.¹²⁶ In 1865, the evangelical magazine *The Day Of Rest* reported that

[i]t is observable that even in the low courts and mews where the roughest costermongers and street Irish congregate, scarcely a window is without its pot or its bower of flowers. We say 'bower' because many of these windows are actually darkened by Virginia creepers, nasturtiums, the pretty yellow 'canariensis', and even common scarlet runners (these last much affected by stablemen and weavers).¹²⁷

A report in the *Gardening World Illustrated* in 1884 described

in the windows of back-houses, in dingy courts...attempts at plant growing are often to be seen under the most uncongenial conditions; many a Fuchsia, Geranium, pot of Musk, Creeping Jenny, or other plant of tenacious hold on life, growing in an old jug or spoutless teapot'.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Rev. S. Hadden Parkes, *Window Gardens for the People and Clean and Tidy Rooms, Being an Experiment to Improve the Homes of the London Poor* (London: S. W. Partridge, 1864), p. 53.

¹²⁶ Rev. S. Hadden Parkes, *Flower Shows of Window Plants for the Working Classes of London: A Paper Read Before the Social Economy Section of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science, at the Annual Meeting Held at the Guildhall, June 1862* (London: Victoria Press, 1862), pp. 5-6 .

¹²⁷ *Day Of Rest*, Sept 1865, p. 458.

¹²⁸ *Gardening World Illustrated*, 20 Sept 1884, p. 40.

In 1891 a *Gardeners' Chronicle* reporter noted that '[p]lants are also grown in windows to a much larger extent than is imagined by anyone walking along the main thoroughfares of Bethnal Green'.¹²⁹ An account of growing up in the 1890s describes a backyard in North Street, also in Bethnal Green

Every year father planted a few geraniums and blue lobelia plants but with the soot, lack of sun and cinder ash in the soil they lingered to a premature death. Nevertheless he persisted and encouraged mother to plant her favourite pot of musk (which had scent in those days) and creeping jenny. If a tuft of grass appeared in the crevices of stone and clinker she would tend it as if it were a lily so divorced totally was she from the country scene.¹³⁰

This raises the question of 'what is a garden?' Can it be just a window box or a pot? Stephen Constantine takes it for granted that a 'garden' is of a reasonable size, attached to a house, and that an amateur gardener would be someone who possessed such a plot, suggesting that such a person would normally have lived in one of the new suburbs.¹³¹ Anne Wilkinson suggests that professional nineteenth century gardeners would have agreed with him – '[t]hey did not recognise amateurs in towns as gardeners at all and did not consider their little patches of shaded, polluted ground to be "gardens"'.¹³² However, she herself correctly points out that '[t]o indulge in gardening, one does not need to have a garden. Gardening is growing things...Floriculture, in particular...can be practised without a garden.'¹³³ Henry Mayhew wrote in about 1850, emphasising the link between 'respectability' and gardening that others also found, that he considered it 'unquestionable that a fondness for indoor flowers, is indicative of the good character and healthful tastes, as well as the domestic and industrious habits, of the city artizan.'¹³⁴

Mayhew also described

¹²⁹ *Gardeners' Chronicle*, 29 Aug 1891, p. 22.

¹³⁰ Walter Southgate, *That's The Way It Was: A Working Class Autobiography 1890-1950* (London: New Clarion Press, 1982), pp. 18-19.

¹³¹ Constantine, 'Amateur Gardening and Popular Recreation', pp. 387-406.

¹³² Wilkinson, 'The Development of Gardening', p. 56.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹³⁴ Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* (London: Griffin Bohn, 1861; repr. New York: Dover Publications, 1968), Vol. 1, p. 132.

the trellis work opposite the windows of cabmen's rooms, which were over stables, with a projecting roof covering the whole, thickly yellow and green with the flowers and leaves of the easily-trained nasturtium and herb "twopence".¹³⁵

In 1861, John Hollingshead observed something similar in the courts off the main road in Whitechapel: 'in some of these repulsive courts the inhabitants cling to a rude love of flowers, and many an unsightly window-ledge is fitted up to resemble a garden enclosure, with miniature railings and gates'.¹³⁶ *The Day of Rest* already referred to gave a longer description of the same sort of 'garden'

[a] favourite fashion is to surround the ledge of the windows - more especially in stable mews - with tiny green palisades, joined by little miniature imitations of five-barred gates painted white. Within these palisades, and along the ledge, are set pots of any cheap and favourite flowers. Oftentimes a large box is filled with mould, and deep set with common red tulips in spring, mignonette in summer, and marigolds and chrysanthemums in autumn.¹³⁷

In 1894, Henry Nevinson, 'an early member of the S.D.F. who had helped organise an East End mission',¹³⁸ was commissioned by the publishers J.J. Arrowsmith to write a series of short stories on working class life in the East End. One of these stories had as its subject Old Parky - given this nickname from 'Victoria Park' because of his love of gardens

But far away the best thing as 'e ever done was the gardens in Thomas's Row, as turned round the corner from where 'e lived, and 'ad a square of garden almost as big as a room in front of each 'ouse. It came about through a neighbour seein' them chickens and askin' 'im to lend a 'and with clearing' out the rubbish from 'is own front. And in a month's time its own mother wouldn't 'ave known that garden ...So it got round as Parky was the man for gardens, and 'e takes 'em all on, the neighbours not begrudgin' 'im a penn'orth of seeds 'ere and there, let alone the oyster shells as 'e pick up and stuck round the borders, instead of rememberin' the grotter. And twelve month after, if yer'd passed and saw them scarlet-runners twinin' themselves over sticks, and the jeannies 'angin' from the winders, and the balsoms [sic] and marigolds, with paths and walls o' shells between, and little palin's with five-barred gates painted green with white tops, paintin' bein' Parky's work, you'd 'ave said it was a respite from the cares and troubles o' life.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 132.

¹³⁶ John Hollingshead, *Ragged London in 1861* (London: Smith, Elder, 1861), p. 47.

¹³⁷ *The Day of Rest*, Sept 1865, p. 458.

¹³⁸ Keating, *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction*, p. 199.

¹³⁹ Henry W. Nevinson, *Neighbours of Ours* (Bristol: J. W. Arrowsmith, 1895), pp. 4-5.

It is interesting that the little palings were as popular in 1894 as they had been more than thirty years earlier and that the plants used were much the same. Nevinson had lived and worked in the East End and knew the district very well indeed. He would personally have observed the kind of garden he described above. Finally, in 1903, Walter P. Wright wrote '[t]hen look at the chrysanthemums! Hundreds of amateurs grow collections where you would not think there was room to hang a clothes line.'¹⁴⁰ Accounts such as these, from so many varied sources, surely suggest that interest in horticulture, even if expressed on a very small scale, was widespread in all parts of the East End.

These gardens were not for economic advantage or for food crops. They were purely decorative and the owners took pains to make them attractive. As Keith Thomas writes, by the end of the eighteenth century, flowers were grown 'not because they were medicinally useful or symbolically meaningful, but because they were aesthetically pleasing.'¹⁴¹ It is certainly true that vegetables played a negligible role in the East End shows. No doubt this was in part because vegetable growing out of doors requires far more land that would have been available to most of the inhabitants, but it may also be because the beauty of flowers brightened an otherwise monotonous scene. As Elizabeth Anne Scott describes, vegetable gardening only became possible on a wide scale when the men were granted allotments in the years before the First World War.¹⁴²

Horticultural Societies and their Shows

The florists' societies of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had always met in public houses. Stephen Constantine suggests that 'the societies and the florists faded obscurely in the mid-nineteenth century, perhaps declining as industrial changes

¹⁴⁰ Walter P. Wright, 'Gardening London', *Living London*, vol. 1 (London: Cassell, 1903), p. 307.

¹⁴¹ Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, p. 230.

¹⁴² Scott, 'Cockney Plots', 2005.

damaged the livelihood of their members.’¹⁴³ In fact, the societies of Tower Hamlets began at exactly this point and flourished for many years after. They also met in public houses – some of the few venues that had rooms large enough for groups of men to meet. It is clear that regular meetings took place. In his lecture in 1858, referred to above (p. 33), Samuel Broome spoke of monthly meetings held in pubs. Members were interested in education, for not only were lectures given by professional outsiders, but in some cases by the members themselves. For example, in 1864, forty members of the Tower Hamlets Floricultural Society met to hear a lecture on ferns by Mr. W. S. Prestoe, Head Gardener of Victoria Park, but by 1866, the *East London Observer* reported of the East Tower Hamlets Floricultural Society

[a] practice has lately been adopted at the meetings of the society, which are held monthly on the first Tuesday, at the Coach and Horses Tavern, Mile-end-road, of one of the members reading an original paper upon the cultivation of some flower or plant, the reading being followed by questions and comments from other members. February’s subject was ‘The Cultivation of the Grape’ and in March Mr. C. Parker spoke on ‘The *Lilium auratum*’ - the last new importation from Japan, and for the possession of bulbs of which there has been a decided rage in floral circles.¹⁴⁴

The choice of subjects is perhaps surprising for amateur gardeners in the East End. Yet vines can be grown in quite small greenhouses (see frontispiece to this chapter, p. 28) and lilies are excellent subjects for growing in pots. In earlier days, men had paid large sums for tulip bulbs. George Glenny wrote in 1862, of his youth fifty years earlier,

Mile End, Bethnal Green, Hackney, Shoreditch, Limehouse, Poplar, Old Ford, and many other places, boasted tulip beds by hundreds, and now thousands of houses occupy the space...In those days an enthusiastic weaver, or shoemaker, or other humble mechanic, with few of the homely comforts, would think but little of buying a bulb worth 2, 3 or even 5 pounds, to be paid for at just so many shillings per week.¹⁴⁵

Mr. Parker no doubt felt the same about possessing the latest lily.

¹⁴³ Constantine, ‘Amateur Gardening and Popular Recreation’, p. 393.

¹⁴⁴ *East London Observer*, 31 March 1866, p. 2.

¹⁴⁵ *Glenny’s Gardener’s Gazette*, June 1862, p. 133.

The major public events arranged by all the societies were the flower shows. Most were able to mount two in the year – a summer show and a chrysanthemum show later in the year. In 1863, the summer show put on by the Tower Hamlets Floricultural Society, lasting two days, was visited by ‘upwards of three thousand persons.’¹⁴⁶ The East Tower Hamlets Show in September 1869 attracted ‘upwards of 2,000 visitors.’¹⁴⁷ A much smaller one-day show, the Bow Cottagers’ Flower Show, for the cottagers of the nearby parishes, drew ‘more than 700 persons during the day.’¹⁴⁸ Prices had been deliberately kept low – 2d till 4 o’clock and 1d after that. One society, the East London Amateur Horticultural Society, introduced a spring show in 1867. It also distributed fuchsia cuttings to local school children and encouraged them to enter the grown plants in the Society’s summer show.¹⁴⁹

These shows were very important events for the societies, and the members took them very seriously. There were strict rules for the conduct of such shows, laid down by the national Horticultural Society (later the Royal Horticultural Society). Just as today, a flower show organiser could obtain a copy of these rules and use them. The East End shows were expected to observe the rules just as meticulously as any upper class show in more favoured locations. Charles Parker was a keen member of the Tower Hamlets Floricultural Society. He not only won prizes for his chrysanthemums, but for fuchsias, asters and dahlias, as well as unspecified collections of plants. However, it was his magnificent chrysanthemums and his competitive desire to show them off that led to a major dispute in the Society, which eventually split in two. The 1863 Chrysanthemum Show, where Charles Parker’s blooms won the first prize, was open for three days, the last of which overlapped with the first Great Chrysanthemum Show held in the Agricultural Halls in Islington, open to growers from the whole metropolitan area. With the support of

¹⁴⁶ *East London Observer*, 12 Sept 1863, p. 2.

¹⁴⁷ *Gardener’s Magazine*, 18 Sept 1869, p. 417.

¹⁴⁸ *East London Observer*, 1 Sept 1866, p. 2.

¹⁴⁹ *East London Observer*, 3 Dec 1870, p. 5.

the Society's chairman, William Eickhoff, a cabinet maker from Bethnal Green, Charles Parker removed his plants from the display in Mile End and took them over to Islington, where he was again awarded first prize. This was against the rules, which insisted that all entries must remain on view until the closure of the show. The majority of the members were prepared to overlook his action, considering that Mr. Parker had brought honour to Tower Hamlets by winning at Islington against all comers, but there were others who felt strongly that rules were rules.

The dispute was obliquely referred to at the Annual Dinner, where George Glenny, who presided, clearly disapproved of Charles Parker's action, as did the Society's treasurer, the nurseryman Joseph Courcha.¹⁵⁰ By the following summer, thirty of the forty-two original members had seceded from the Tower Hamlets Society to form the East Tower Hamlets Floricultural Society, membership of which had grown to sixty-two by April 1864 and eighty-five by May.¹⁵¹ Both societies held summer shows which were both warmly reviewed in the *East London Observer*, no doubt anxious not to offend either group. However soon after a correspondence war broke out in the paper, and for once it is possible to 'hear' the voices of the gardeners themselves. It is a clear example of Martin Hewitt's point about the importance of the correspondence column in revealing the points of view of 'ordinary' people.

William Eickhoff, supported by two anonymous correspondents, 'Chrysanthemum' and 'Fair Play', took on George Glenny, who was supported by two exhibiting members of the Tower Hamlets Society, George Rosenwold of Stepney and Joseph Bangs of Mile End. In the course of a long letter, published on 8th October, Eickhoff accused Bangs of showing 'fuchsias grown for him' and 'fruit purchased by him.'¹⁵² Joseph Bangs replied on 10th October with an almost equally long letter, which included the sentence 'I can only

¹⁵⁰ *East London Observer*, 12 Dec 1863, p. 2.

¹⁵¹ *Gardener's Magazine*, 16 April 1864, p. 122; *ibid.*, 14 May 1864, p. 160.

¹⁵² *East London Observer*, 8 Oct 1864, p. 3.

hurl back the statement to his teeth.¹⁵³ William Eickhoff's response to that, the following week, was 'I think it would have been more to the purpose if he had informed me where his orchard was situated.'¹⁵⁴ Eickhoff was also tackling George Glenny directly. Here he was up against an opponent well known for his intemperate language, and one who had his own column in *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper* and his own periodical, *Glenny's Gardener's Gazette*, in which he could – and did, vigorously – pursue the feud outside the correspondence columns of the *East London Observer*. In a letter in the *East London Observer*, William Eickhoff wrote

To give the public some idea of Mr. Glenny's very polite style, I have culled a few of the gentlemanly names he has called us in his different articles. We are described as "money grabbers" "grasping exhibitors" "upstarts" "outcasts" "firebrands" "bounceable young gentlemen" "restless spirits" "men all for self" "noisy demagogues" "shabby leaders" "unscrupulous knaves" "castaways" "sneaking cowards" "outlawed convicted traitors" "low, cunning, outlawed scamps" "unprincipled scamps" "scavengers who have scraped together the refuse of chrysanthemum societies" "men of incapacity and of miserably low grade of intellect who can neither write a sentence in plain English nor spell the most common word". And all because a man removed some of his plants before the close of the show, with the sanction of the members, and because I would not be made a tool of to prevent their removal according to an agreement.¹⁵⁵

It is clear that very strong feelings were stirred on both sides by this dispute, however minor it may seem to those not involved. It illustrates how, as Andrew August wrote, 'in their neighbourhoods, working class Londoners established and perpetuated hierarchies of dignity, respect and reputation.'¹⁵⁶ He concluded 'In communities in which everyone knew everyone, reputation among one's peers had great value.'¹⁵⁷ These were men who took their growing and showing seriously, who were observing (or not) the same rules as applied to the Royal Horticultural Shows; they may have been working men and amateurs, but they resented accusations of cheating as warmly as any professional. These

¹⁵³ *East London Observer*, 15 Oct 1864, p. 3.

¹⁵⁴ *East London Observer*, 22 Oct 1864, p. 3.

¹⁵⁵ *East London Observer*, 8 Oct 1864, p. 3, quoting phrases from *Glenny's Gardener's Gazette* on various dates in 1864.

¹⁵⁶ Andrew August, 'A culture of consolation? Rethinking politics in working-class London, 1870-1914', *Historical Research*, 74 (2001), p. 195.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

men founded and ran their own societies – they had chairmen, treasurers, committees and rule books just as any upper class society would. William Eickhoff and his supporters were prepared to argue their case with passion against a man as eminent in the floricultural world as George Glenny. As Andrew August writes ‘[w]orking class Londoners were assertive and energetic, but not always in ways that met...historians’ *a priori* categories of proper working-class activity.’¹⁵⁸

One derogatory phrase used by Glenny that William Eickhoff did not quote was that he was ‘the hired chairman of a pot house in Whitechapel.’¹⁵⁹ As Peter Bailey points out ‘the co-existence of seemingly contradictory modes of behaviour within a single life style was not an aberration...particularly relating to leisure-time activities.’¹⁶⁰ Like Bill Banks, the subject of Peter Bailey’s study, William Eickhoff was both evidencing eminently respectable behaviour in his membership of serious horticultural societies and, if Glenny is to be believed, distinctly ‘unrespectable’ behaviour in being associated with an entertainment establishment associated with drink. Eickhoff no doubt made use of this ‘music hall’ experience when organising ‘an excellent concert’ after the East Tower Hamlets chrysanthemum show in 1864.¹⁶¹ Entertainments in addition to the show itself were a regular feature. Bands played, and concerts and balls were regularly held in the evening.¹⁶² These were the sort of dances that the respectable people of the East End could attend without loss of status. This was dancing untainted by ‘unsavoury social intercourse’, and as such permitted even by a churchman such as R.W. Dale.¹⁶³ If the weather was good, thousands of people attended over the days the shows were open,

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 197.

¹⁵⁹ *Glenny’s Garden Gazette*, June 1864, p. 67.

¹⁶⁰ Peter Bailey, “‘Will The Real Bill Banks Please Stand Up?’” Towards a Role Analysis of Mid-Victorian Working-Class Respectability’, *Journal of Social History*, 12 (1979), p. 341.

¹⁶¹ *East London Observer*, 26 Nov 1864, p. 2.

¹⁶² *East London Observer*, 5 Sept 1863, p. 2; *ibid.*, 11 April 1874, p. 6.

¹⁶³ Quoted in Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control 1830-1885* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 70. It is strange that Bailey does not consider gardening as an important enough ‘rational recreation’ to mention it in his book. His two references to gardens only consider them as a location in which to play lawn tennis.

though they were easily deterred by rain.¹⁶⁴ The most vivid example of this was described at the 1870 Annual Dinner of the East London Amateur Floricultural Society

The first day of the summer show was exceedingly wet, and this most materially affected their receipts, not more than £2 being taken both in money and tickets on that day; but there were upwards of £60 in receipts for the two following days, which proved that had fine weather favoured the society on the first day (which is usually the best) the receipts would have reached not far short of £100.¹⁶⁵

The shows were open well into the evening, to allow working people to attend.

Although most reports in the papers and magazines do not give actual numbers, they always say the shows were well attended, often complaining that the rooms are overcrowded. In the early days they were held in the ‘function rooms’ of local public houses – the Tower Hamlets Floricultural Society showed regularly at the Eagle Tavern, Mile End Road, the East Tower Hamlets ‘in the great assembly room in the garden of the Edinboro’ Castle, Rhodeswell Road, Stepney.’¹⁶⁶ The East London Amateur Horticultural Society broke the traditional link between flower shows and public houses and held its show in the Vestry Hall at Bow. The summer show the following year moved up to larger premises in the Grammar School, Tredegar Square. The next year (1868) they moved into a large tent on the Bow Cricket Ground, Coborn Road – the existence of a cricket ground is another indication of a large open space in the East End, though a glance at a map of 1863 shows that it must have been dominated by the Eastern Counties Railway. They held the summer exhibition there again in 1870. The tent was one hundred and twenty feet by forty – a sizeable area to fill with what the *East London Observer* called ‘probably the most creditable horticultural display yet seen at the East End.’¹⁶⁷ In 1873, they were back in the

¹⁶⁴ *East London Observer*, 12 Sept 1863, p. 2; *ibid.*, 10 Sept 1864, p. 2; *ibid.*, 27 Aug 1870, p. 5; *Gardener’s Magazine*, 8 Sept 1869, pp. 416-7.

¹⁶⁵ *East London Observer*, 3 Dec 1870, p. 5.

¹⁶⁶ *Gardener’s Magazine*, 3 Sept 1864, p. 281.

¹⁶⁷ *East London Observer*, 27 Aug 1870, p. 5.

grounds of Stepney Grammar School, in a flag-decorated marquee lit by temporary gas fittings.¹⁶⁸

The East London Horticultural Society had held its first show in 1866, at which there were displays of foliage plants lent by the Head Gardener of Victoria Park and by Charles Parker. In the same year there were also shows mounted by the Tower Hamlets Floricultural Society, the East Tower Hamlets Floricultural Society, the Bow Common Cottagers, and the Homerton Amateur Floricultural Society. This last had been in existence since 1854, and in the description of its show in 1863, the *Gardener's Magazine* had written 'as might be expected from a society of purely working men, the flowers exhibited were, with very few exceptions, old-established favourites.'¹⁶⁹ In 1866, the *Gardener's Magazine* again emphasised that the members were working-men for whom floriculture was their recreation, and wrote that the society

has therefore our earnest wishes for its success, for as London spreads on all sides, and green fields are swallowed up, floricultural societies are the only means left of encouraging and preserving a shadow of rurality in the midst of town.¹⁷⁰

In this same year, the *East London Observer* reported that the blooms in the Tower Hamlets Chrysanthemum Show

did not come up to the mark of previous efforts, but this is to be accounted for by the fact that many of our floricultural friends have been deprived of their "bits of ground" in which they took so much delight by the ruthless rage for buildings.¹⁷¹

It is clear from both these accounts that there was an awareness that open, green space was under threat and needed protection from encroaching developments.

The constant repetition in all sources of the fact that the exhibitors in all the Tower Hamlets shows were 'working men' suggests that this is a description that the men

¹⁶⁸ *East London Observer*, 30 Aug 1873, p. 5.

¹⁶⁹ *Gardener's Magazine*, 12 Sept 1863, p. 290.

¹⁷⁰ *Gardener's Magazine*, 22 Sept 1866, p. 423.

¹⁷¹ *East London Observer*, 24 Nov 1866, p. 2.

concerned were happy to accept. As none of the original society records survive, it is only possible to make tentative identifications, by means of the appropriate census returns, of a few of the members whose addresses are given in the newspaper accounts of show winners. Thus it is possible to see, from the 1871 census, that some members of the East London Amateur Horticultural Society in 1875 were in their early thirties and their occupations include a carpenter, a lighterman, a postman, an engineer, a stationer's assistant. Charles Parker himself, who in 1863 had described himself as a 'working man' (see p. 35), could perhaps be considered to have moved out of the working class, as by 1875 he was the co-proprietor of a chemical works employing sixteen men and, according to the 1871 census, a manufacturing chemist.¹⁷² His works were near the River Lea and were visited in 1875 by the journalist William Glenny Crory, who was conducting a survey on East End Industries for the *East London Observer*, later published in book form.

Glenny Crory commented

I have, however, reserved a corner for Messrs. Parker and Amiss, Old Ford-road, chiefly because that, with all that is said as to the unhealthiness of chemical works, facts already matters of 'news' show that under the very shaft of these Works flowers have been raised which took several prizes at the annual show recently held at the Bow and Bromley Institute. [i.e. in March].

Glenny Crory belittled hostile comments about the smells arising from such a factory – though admitting 'there might be some improvements made which would render unusual – not necessarily injurious – smells less prevalent.' After a discussion of the main products, ammonia, acetic acid and glauber salts, and the factory buildings, he returned to the question of the smells - '[a]s to the offensive smells, probably the existence of greenhouses, in which palms, ferns, and flowers are successfully grown, will be regarded as an answer.'¹⁷³ Charles Parker, who lived at the works, had obviously built himself greenhouses in the factory yard, no doubt more convenient for him than the lean-to some

¹⁷² 1871 Census, TNA/RG 10/576/73, p. 31.

¹⁷³ Glenny Crory, *East London Industries*, pp. 63-74.

distance away. He continued to exhibit his plants with unbroken success for many years and by 1880 was the chairman of the East London Horticultural Society.¹⁷⁴

The leading members of the horticultural societies all seem to come from the ‘upper level’ of the working class, but there were likely to be others from lower strata. An admittedly much later account, from 1897, describes ‘two huge fan-shaped fuchsias, 5 feet by 4 feet, grown by a dock labourer, who with his wife occupy a small room at 9 Coutt’s Road...one plant occupies each of the two small windows, and they have the greatest attention.’¹⁷⁵ This man was a member of the People’s Palace Horticultural Society, founded in 1894, which gradually took over as the leading Horticultural Society in the East End.

Apart from the incident provoked by the early removal of Mr. Parker’s chrysanthemums described above, relations between the local gardeners seem to have been good. Along with other Tower Hamlets men William Eickhoff lent plants ‘not for competition’ to improve the appearance of smaller flower shows, such as that of the Social Brothers.¹⁷⁶ He also sent ‘a nice group of ferns and other plants’ to the Lea Bridge Amateur Horticultural Show in 1868. The Lea Green Society’s gardens – ‘allotment gardens’ according to the *Gardener’s Magazine*¹⁷⁷ - were somewhat different from those of the other East End Societies, being very similar to the ‘guinea gardens’ of the north and the midlands, which Jeremy Burchardt suggests ‘functionally...relate more closely to the continental tradition of summer-house allotments than to the British tradition of food-producing plots.’¹⁷⁸ A description of the Lea Bridge gardens bears this out

We know of one long plot of land at Lea Bridge Station, on the Great Eastern Railway, which is entirely let out in small strips to ‘Londoners’, who build a little

¹⁷⁴ *East London Observer*, 20 Mar 1880, p. 7.

¹⁷⁵ *Gardeners’ Chronicle*, 24 July 1897, p. 58. Coutt’s Road is just south of Mile End Road, not far from a major gas works.

¹⁷⁶ *Gardener’s Magazine*, 3 Oct 1863, p. 313.

¹⁷⁷ *Gardener’s Magazine*, 12 Sept 1868, pp. 390-391.

¹⁷⁸ Jeremy Burchardt, *Paradise Lost: Rural Idyll and Social Change in England since 1800* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2002), p. 50.

summer-house at one end, and come down on an evening, or on a Saturday half-holiday, to 'do their gardening', and on Sunday bring their friends to admire the result; which, by the way, is very creditable, for we have often seen some fine beds of tulips and other flowers, which would have done credit to many a nobler ground. Every summer, too, a 'show' is held, and a brass band is engaged to finish the day with a dance in an adjoining field.¹⁷⁹

In 1867, Mrs. Hendrie, wife of the ground landlord of the plot, gave a silver cup for the best flower arrangement exhibited at the show, which was competed for annually thereafter.¹⁸⁰ In 1870, Mr. Hendrie himself, a director of a gas company, donated ten guineas to the society.¹⁸¹ The floral arrangement classes, both table decorations and bouquets, were a speciality of the Lea Bridge Shows and it is only at these shows that men seem to have competed in them. Given the more rural situation of the gardens, there were separate classes for plants grown in greenhouses and for plants grown out of doors. As this distinction was never made at any of the other shows, it seems very likely that most plants shown in the Tower Hamlets shows were grown under glass, to protect against the heavier pollution of the atmosphere. The reports of the Lea Bridge shows make it clear that there were also classes for vegetables, though these are always merely mentioned without any details being given. This suggests that there was less local interest in vegetable growing than in flowers. Just as with the other shows, the Lea Bridge Society could attract large crowds. In 1874, for example, 'nearly two thousand' visitors came on the first day and 'on the second day the attendance was proportionately good.'¹⁸²

William Eickhoff played a full part in the horticultural community life of his neighbourhood, both on its social and its gardening side. In 1863 he was the chairman of the committee that organised a testimonial for William Prestoe, the Head Gardener of Victoria Park, and was one of those who performed at the dinner at which the presentation

¹⁷⁹ *Day of Rest*, Nov 1865, p. 28.

¹⁸⁰ *Gardener's Magazine*, 14 Sept 1867, p. 392.

¹⁸¹ *East London Observer*, 26 Nov 1870, p. 5.

¹⁸² *Gardener's Magazine*, 5 Sept 1874, p. 476.

was made.¹⁸³ In the same year he attended a meeting of the Central Society of Horticulture, where he ‘took an active part in the discussion’ after a paper given on the fuchsia by the gardener of Buckingham Palace.¹⁸⁴ The fellow members who spoke were all highly qualified, some being professional gardeners – Samuel Broome, Joseph Courcha and Nathan Cole – and also included George Glenny. In 1864 Eickhoff brought along a ‘collection of beautiful *Amaranthus tricolor*’ to another meeting of the Society.¹⁸⁵

The members of the horticultural societies such as the Tower Hamlets Amateur Floricultural or the East London Amateur Horticultural were, as stated, on the whole from the elite of the working class. There was, however, another group of those who gardened on a very different scale – those without any access to even the smallest plot of land who were restricted to indoor pots of flowers. Among these, it is perhaps less justified to speak of ‘men’ who gardened, for there are many more references to poor women who tended their pot of musk or nettle geranium. These are the men and women who were targeted by the philanthropic, who believed that by encouraging this love of growing things with flower shows especially for these poorest of gardeners they could also encourage them to develop a habit of foresight and cleanliness – you had to plan ahead to have a plant ready for the show some months in the future, and it was possible to see that a plant flourished more readily if its leaves were kept dusted and it was given access to fresh air. The movement was begun in 1860 by a curate in Bloomsbury. He put up a few handbills advertising a flower show for these window plants in the local Bible Mission Rooms and 140 plants were registered four weeks in advance – of which 94 actually made it to the

¹⁸³ *East London Observer*, 7 Nov 1863, p. 2.

¹⁸⁴ *Gardener's Magazine*, 18 July 1863, p. 227. The gardener was Mr. Wyness, who was also a regular judge in Tower Hamlets. William Eickhoff was often a winner in the fuchsia classes, so this was a subject on which he no doubt felt able to contribute from his own experience.

¹⁸⁵ *Gardener's Magazine*, 13 Aug 1864, p. 260.

show.¹⁸⁶ The idea was taken up all over London and elsewhere. However, as the *Gardener's Magazine* put it in 1867

We beg for all the poor people's exhibitions that are to be held this year, the generous consideration of horticulturalists in the several districts in which the exhibitions occur. Let them not suppose that the interests of horticulture are in any way bound up with this movement. It is quite otherwise.¹⁸⁷

This quotation comes from the leading article that month, and is therefore probably written by the editor, Shirley Hibberd. He is totally in favour of the spirit behind the movement, but pleads for some realism among the organisers – get real gardeners in to do the judging, because they can spot tricks; don't be over-ambitious in the number and kind of classes which are often beyond the capabilities of potential competitors, because the poor are easily discouraged. But the flower shows proved popular. In 1870 the *East London Observer* reported on two of them: in Shadwell and Ratcliff a show was held in the Mission Hall that lasted three days. A hundred and thirteen exhibitors took part 'and between 300 and 400 plants, consisting of geraniums, fuchsias, musks, calceolarias, and other choice window plants; and the healthy condition of the plants reflects great credit upon the exhibitors, for the great care which must have been taken in the training.'¹⁸⁸ The second show was held in the National School-room in Hare Street, Bethnal Green. It was the third in the series, which had been 'instituted in compliance with the wishes of a few poor women in the parish. To many the cultivation of flowers gives great satisfaction and amusement.'¹⁸⁹ This suggests that although in the majority of cases the shows were established and run by the clergy, there was genuine enthusiasm on the part of the poor who took part. The numbers of entries also provide another proof that there was widespread interest in having growing things in the home. Although Andrew August suggests that the working classes were perfectly capable of 'acting in ways that satisfied

¹⁸⁶ Hadden Parkes, *Window Gardens*, p. 11.

¹⁸⁷ *Gardener's Magazine*, 13 April 1867, p. 15.

¹⁸⁸ *East London Observer*, 6 Aug 1870, p. 5.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

middle-class philanthropists' image of their own impact',¹⁹⁰ if that brought charity or other resources they needed, the prizes offered at these shows were comparatively small – the first prize for adults was 5s. – so it seems unlikely the exhibitors entered just in order to win one. The motivation seems much more likely to have been the same competitive spirit that inspired the Floricultural Society members, if not merely that they liked having something of beauty in their homes. A flower show organised by Rev. Samuel Barnett of St. Jude's was used to draw another moral lesson: the prizes were presented by the Jewish philanthropist Mr. N. Montefiore, who stated that flowers 'taught a lesson to many, by blooming equally surely in the houses of men of all creeds. He rejoiced that the lesson of tolerance seemed to have been learnt, and was very glad to see both Jews and Christians joined together in a flower show.'¹⁹¹ It was not only the middle class 'outsiders' who were moved to do their bit for the less fortunate. In 1867, the Tower Hamlets Floricultural Society invited all the aged inhabitants of the Bethnal Green Workhouse to their summer show and gave each one a bunch of flowers and a penny.¹⁹²

Conclusion

It would no doubt be wrong to say that horticulture was a mass leisure pursuit in Tower Hamlets in the 19th century. However, it is clear that it was popular with a wide range, from members of the elite of the working class, with their improvised greenhouses and show standard blooms, to those living in single rooms with a flower pot on the window sill.

¹⁹⁰ August, 'Culture of Consolation?', p. 203.

¹⁹¹ *East London Observer*, 18 July 1874, p. 5.

¹⁹² *Gardener's Magazine*, 21 Sept 1867, p. 402.

At the beginning of the period covered by this thesis, in 1838, Dr. Southwood Smith described an area near Wellington Row, Bethnal Green, where keen gardeners were evidently not deterred by unprepossessing surroundings, for there was

a ditch, from eight to ten feet broad [which] extends nearly to the Hackney Road. In the great part of its course gardens neatly cultivated extend from adjacent houses to its edge. The stench arising from the ditch at this moment [i.e. May 1838] is intolerable. The poor people inhabiting the neighbouring houses, while cultivating their little gardens with so much care as a recreation and in the hope of promoting their health, little think that at every moment they are inhaling a deadly poison.¹⁹³

Ten years later, in 1848, Dr. Hector Gavin wrote of ‘the weary artisan and the toil-worn weaver’ who ‘dedicated their spare hours, in the proper seasons, to what has always been considered a refined, as well as an innocent recreation, the cultivation of beautiful flowers’ in Whisker’s Gardens, Bethnal Green – just such a ‘bit of ground’ as was disappearing under bricks and mortar only a few years later. This was ‘laid out, in neat plots, as gardens. The choicest flowers are frequently raised here, and great taste, and considerable refinement are evidently possessed by those who cultivate them. Now, among the cultivators are the poor – even the very poor – of Bethnal Green.’ He goes on

[t]he love of the beautiful, and the sense of order which are readily accorded to the artisan, or weaver, in his neat garden, surrounded by the choicest dahlias or tulips carefully cultivated, are denied to him when visited in his filthy, dirty street. When seen in his damp and dirty home, he is generally accused of personal unseemliness, and a disregard of the commonest appearances of decency and regularity; yet, in his garden, he displays evidences of a refined taste and a natural love of beauty and of order. The two are irreconcilable, and as the one sentiment is natural and spontaneous, we are irresistibly led to regard the personal uncleanness of the poor, and the impurities which surround their houses, as the results of agencies foreign to the individual.¹⁹⁴

Gavin is very unusual among his contemporaries in understanding that to live in dirt is not always a matter of personal choice. The ‘agencies’ – lack of a decent water supply, lack of a sewer system, jerry-built and overcrowded housing that many landlords

¹⁹³ Southwood Smith, Fourth Report to the Commissioners Under the Poor Law Amendment Act, 1838, p. 90.

¹⁹⁴ Gavin, *Sanitary Ramblings*, p. 11.

were unwilling to keep in good repair, the constant presence of pollution from smoking chimneys and factory effluent – made it virtually impossible for even the most eager to keep the house clean. It is interesting that he chooses to use the evidence of the poor artisan's garden as an indication that he possesses good qualities that might otherwise be missed.

Writing in 1912, Harold Murray also described the East Ender's love of flowers in terms that suggest that little had changed over the half century. The fact that he wrote of 'thousands' of working men and of a street market doing a 'roaring trade' suggest strongly that the cultivation of plants was not restricted to the relatively small number who grew to a show standard but was a pastime enjoyed by many.

In the window of the poorest home you may see a struggling plant fighting its environment; I have even heard of geraniums healthily growing in condensed milk tins! I have been to a flower show in which every exhibit came from one of the most poverty-stricken districts in the metropolis. Thousands of working-men, when the day's work is done, would sooner return to the tiny flower plots in their back yard of which they are so proud, than visit the most attractive place of entertainment. There are streets in which a long line of open stalls lines the pavement. They are covered with creepers, plants, bulbs, or seeds. Only working-people patronise them, but they do a roaring trade. How the working-man who has spent a penny or two on something for his miniature garden – perhaps only a window-box – hugs his precious possessions as he takes it [sic] home!¹⁹⁵

The evidence suggests that most competitive gardeners were men, but that women also gardened. It is no wonder that the neighbourhood could support at least half a dozen floricultural or horticultural societies and more than twenty nursery establishments to supply their needs. It is to the professional gardeners of the neighbourhood, both nurserymen and market gardeners, that attention will be given in the next chapter.

¹⁹⁵ Quoted in *Down The East End: An Illustrated Anthology*, ed. Peter Marcan (London: Peter Marcan Publications, 1986), p. 5.

Chapter Two:
The Men Who Gardened: Professional

PICTURE DELETED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS

London Plant Seller, c. 1819: from 'Street Cries of London'. Collage No. 26275, London Metropolitan Archives.

Introduction

Ronald Webber, horticulturalist and writer, suggests that '[h]orticulture can be split into two divisions, one associated with the home, the other with earning a living. The former is amateur gardening, the latter commercial horticulture.'¹⁹⁶ The previous chapter has shown the strength of amateur gardening in the East End. This chapter will show that there was also a strong presence of nurserymen and market gardeners there.

Most garden historians have given only brief consideration to nurserymen and even less to market gardeners, preferring to concentrate on the gardens themselves or landscape design. Apart from John Harvey, no one has attempted any comprehensive study of nurserymen – and he only took the story to the first half of the nineteenth century.¹⁹⁷ There have been both autobiographies and studies of plant hunters and their exciting, adventurous journeys in South America, China, Australia and South Africa to find new species which the nurserymen at home would nurture and grow on in sufficient quantities to sell. Many of these hunters were sponsored by Kew Gardens and by some of the larger nurseries, notably Veitch's, originally of Exeter but later of Chelsea.¹⁹⁸ The son of Hugh Low of Clapton, one of the most important East End nurserymen, sent plants back from Borneo.¹⁹⁹ The greatest of the Stoke Newington firms, Loddiges of Hackney, did not sponsor their own hunters, but they bought seeds and plants from far and wide and were renowned cultivators and popularisers of orchids and palms.

Ronald Webber is alone since the early part of the twentieth century in considering the history of market gardening, especially around London. He, a trained horticulturalist,

¹⁹⁶ Ronald Webber, *The Early Horticulturalists* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1968), p. 9.

¹⁹⁷ John Harvey, *Early Nurserymen* (London: Phillimore, 1974).

¹⁹⁸ For example, Sue Shephard, *Seeds of Fortune: A Gardening Dynasty* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003) tells the story of Veitch and its collectors. Mary Gribbin & John Gribbin, *Flower Hunters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) gives short biographies of twelve of the main collectors from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Gribbins refer to these men as 'botanists', though many of them were collecting with a view to selling what they found either to rich patrons or the nurseries in England.

¹⁹⁹ Edward Kemp, *The Parks, Gardens, etc., of London and its Suburbs Described and Illustrated for the Guidance of Strangers* (London: Weale, 1851), p. 172.

worked for thirteen years with a Covent Garden market firm before becoming a horticultural journalist and wrote three books dealing with the subject.²⁰⁰ He tried to define the difference between nurserymen and market gardeners. The nurseryman ‘mainly raised young plants, roots, bulbs and the like for replanting by others...Much of his trade was done at his own place of business where he would have a display of things he had to offer.’ On the other hand ‘the market gardener, as his name implies, grew produce to sell in the market.’²⁰¹ This was usually, though by no means exclusively, vegetables and fruit for human consumption. Both branches of the horticultural trade demanded skill to raise the best crops, a knowledge of the best varieties and the best cultural means. Neither was reliant on large acreages for success. Market gardeners, who were expert at intensive cultivation, could raise excellent crops on surprisingly small amounts of land.

Although there have been many studies of East End industry, pointing out what a wide variety of both large and small enterprises could be found there, no one has considered horticulture as one of them. It would be incorrect to suggest that horticulture was a major employer when compared with the docks or the furniture and garment trades, however the market gardens and nurseries that flourished in the changing conditions throughout the century were the latest manifestations of a long tradition of commercial gardening in the area. At the beginning of the period under consideration there were still a considerable number of them, though by the end of the century the market gardeners and many of the larger nurseries had been driven across the River Lea and into Essex or up the Lea Valley into Hertfordshire by the growing urbanisation of the countryside around London.

The spread of building between 1840 and 1900 can clearly be followed on a series of maps. These maps clearly indicate how the open spaces, including nurseries and market

²⁰⁰ Webber, *The Early Horticulturalists* ; idem., *Covent Garden: Mud-salad Market* (London: Dent & Sons, 1969); idem., *Market Gardening: The History of Commercial Flower, Fruit and Vegetable Growing* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1972). Biographical information from jacket of *Covent Garden*.

²⁰¹ Webber, *Market Gardening*, p. 65.

gardens, gradually disappeared, threatening the livelihood of the men who cultivated them. A plan of 1805 sets the scene – very little development beyond what is now Cannon Street, just the main Whitechapel-Mile End Road, indications of gardens – probably market – almost up to Brick Lane. Most of the docks are yet to be built, so the settlements along the bank of the Thames are more associated with the shipyards and remain separate from one another.²⁰² Even in 1835, when Cross's *New Plan of London*²⁰³ came out, the spread eastwards is far from dramatic: the Commercial Road has been built connecting the City with the West India Docks; the village of Stepney is now almost joined to Whitechapel; many of the gardens in Bethnal Green north of the Mile End Road have disappeared. Nevertheless, Dr. Southwood Smith, in 1838, said of Bethnal Green

In the greater part of it the streets are not close, nor are the houses crowded. On the contrary, large open spaces of ground intervene between them; but in one part the population is as densely crowded as in the closest and most thickly populated parts of the city.²⁰⁴

But, as James Pennethorne, designer of Victoria Park, suggested, eastwards from what is now Cambridge Heath Road there are great areas of open land, mainly used for market gardens or grazing land for the cattle coming in to Smithfield and the other meat markets.²⁰⁵ Wyld's map of 1841 shows very little difference as far as building goes, but it does indicate what was to be a major cause of later development – there are now two railways cutting straight across Tower Hamlets from west to east, the Eastern Counties to the north and the Blackwall from Fenchurch Street to the East India Docks to the south.²⁰⁶ A map of 1843, surveyed by B. R. Davies, shows the area just after the creation of Victoria

²⁰² *Bowles two-sheet Plan of the Cities of London and Westminster; with the Borough of Southwark; comprehending the new buildings and other attractions* (London: Bowles and Carver, 1805), BL.I/1805, Institute for Historical Research, London.

²⁰³ *Cross's New Plan of London: 1835* (London: J. Cross, 1835). See Item 1 in folder.

²⁰⁴ Southwood Smith, Fourth Report of the Commissioners Under the Poor Law Amendment Act, 1838, Supplement 3 vol. xxviii.147., p. 90.

²⁰⁵ Victoria Park Papers, MBW/OW/VP/001, London Metropolitan Archives, London.

²⁰⁶ *Plan of London and Westminster, with the Borough of Southwark: reduced from the large plan in forty sheets* (London: James Wyld, 1841), BL.I/1841, Institute for Historical Research, London.

Park, indicating just how isolated it was in open country.²⁰⁷ Eleven years later, another Davies map, of 1854, shows railways crossing from north to south as well, and a very noticeable expansion of building eastward, virtually to the banks of the Regent's Canal.²⁰⁸ Nevertheless, the extremely detailed *Stanford Library Map* of 1862, which indicates market gardens, nurseries and open spaces, makes it clear that by no means all the area had been built over.²⁰⁹ Five years later, the even larger scale Ordnance Survey maps begin to appear and by consulting succeeding editions the gradual disappearance of nurseries can be followed (though some still remain even in 1894).²¹⁰ However, by the time Charles Booth's *Poverty Maps* came out in 1889, building development had reached the River Lea itself.²¹¹

The new railway lines from the centre of London to the docks and to the east coast brought new commercial competition. This was brought to the attention of market gardeners as early as 1839. The *Gardeners' Chronicle* warned them 'not to take long leases, at high rents, of the ground they at present occupy; because in a few years, in consequence of the several railways commenced or projected, the London vegetable markets will command a supply from the whole of the central counties of England.'²¹² However, by contrast, the coming of the railways and the building of houses was not an unalloyed disaster for the nurseries. Seeds and plants could be sent by train. Many of the new houses had gardens, even if small, and those gardens needed plants. There was plenty of scope for both nurseries and market gardens to have profitable businesses in the East End.

²⁰⁷ *London 1843, drawn and engraved from authentic documents and personal observation by B. R. Davies* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1843). Pr.Gp.4, London Metropolitan Archives, London. See Item 2 in folder.

²⁰⁸ *Davies new map of London: showing the railway stations and all modern improvements* (London: A. Newbury, 1854), BL.I/1854, Institute for Historical Research, London.

²⁰⁹ *Stanford's Library Map of London and its Suburbs* (London: Stanford, 1862; repr.: Guildhall Library, 1980), Control No. k1285387, London Metropolitan Archives, London. See Item 3 in folder.

²¹⁰ Map Collection, British Library.

²¹¹ Charles Booth, *Life And Labour In London. Descriptive Map of London Poverty 1889: North Eastern Sheet*. rev. edn. vol. v (London: Macmillan, 1902). See Item 4 in folder.

²¹² Quoted in Webber, *Market Gardening*, p. 101.

Nurseries

In this section an examination will be made of a representative selection of the various types of nurseries to be found in the East End, showing how they developed over time. The East of London had been the site of nurseries from an early date, even though, like market gardens, they were more numerous to the west. John Harvey, the great authority on the development of nurseries, says that around 1605 they clustered around 'the inner suburbs from Clerkenwell to Whitechapel.'²¹³ Writing of the Commonwealth period, he says that 'it is probably a symptom of the effective transfer of power from the royal Court at Westminster to the merchants of the City that the outstanding gardens were, for about thirty years, an East End phenomenon.'²¹⁴

Leonard Gurle had a 12 acre nursery in Whitechapel and became gardener to King Charles II. A group of nurseries in Hoxton included that of George Rickets, who had a range of 190 tulips, a flower that was still much prized in the East End in the nineteenth century. By far the most famous of the group was Thomas Fairchild, whose nursery was, according to John Harvey 'one of the most influential nurseries in the whole history of British gardening.'²¹⁵ In the first quarter of the eighteenth century he was an extremely skilled plantsman and botanist and wrote the first book to deal with gardening in towns, *The City Gardener*, published in 1722. It is interesting that there was now a market for such a book among the less wealthy town dwellers, anticipating the magazines of the nineteenth century. John Abercrombie, another East End nurseryman, published *Every Man His Own Gardener* in 1767. Malcolm Thick maintains that '[n]urserymen were the aristocrats of the gardening community. If their businesses thrived, they were rich enough

²¹³ Harvey, *Early Nurserymen*, p. 42.

²¹⁴ Ibid., p. 45.

²¹⁵ Ibid., p. 77.

to become gentlemen. Their knowledge of gardening was such that they frequently wrote books on the subject and were the best botanists and plant breeders of their day.'²¹⁶

Another influential nurseryman of the later eighteenth century was John Gordon, with a nursery in Mile End. He was, according to John Harvey, together with James Lee of Hammersmith

responsible for the introduction to Britain, or the effective cultivation, of an enormous proportion of the new plants which streamed in, in an ever increasing flood, from 1740 onwards...they belong essentially to the modern rather than to the early nurserymen.²¹⁷

Gordon himself died in 1780, but his nursery continued into the next century. Several other nurseries founded in the eighteenth century also lasted into the nineteenth. There was Pamplin's on the Lea Bridge Road - originally founded by the Siborns, father and son, and then run from about 1821 to 1869 by James and William Pamplin. There was Smiths, in Dalston, Hackney, founded about 1785, which by 1849 extended to 30 acres and had become one of the principal firms of the London area, with over 30,000 square feet of glass; and last, but by no means least, there was Loddiges, also in Hackney.

It is clear from this outline that there was a long tradition of nurseries in the East End of London. As the next section will discuss, in the nineteenth century there was still a wide range of establishments in the area, from large, market-oriented firms to the smaller men who would cater for local gardeners. The section begins with the most famous but one that, unlike many of the others, was unable to adapt to the effects of growing urbanisation.

²¹⁶ Malcolm Thick, *The Neat House Gardens, Early Market Gardening Around London*, (London: Prospect Books, 1998), p. 59.

²¹⁷ Harvey, *Early Nurserymen*, p. 84.

Loddiges

Of all the various nurseries that will be discussed in this section, Loddiges was by far the most prestigious. It was described by Edward Kemp, landscape gardener and later park designer, as ‘one of the oldest and most celebrated of the London gardens of its class.’²¹⁸ The firm that was to become Loddiges was founded in about 1756 by Johan Busch, a German immigrant. Busch had an immense network of influential contacts in Europe as well as in England. He is recorded as supplying plants to Princess Augusta, mother of George III, whose collection eventually formed the basis of Kew Gardens. In 1771 Busch went to Russia to work for the Empress Catherine the Great. While he was away, his nursery was taken over by Joachim Conrad Loddiges, also a German in origin, who had come to England in 1761. He added to the acreage of the nursery and brought his sons, William and George, into the business with him. It was William who drew up a list of 151 plants which Loddiges nursery had introduced into general cultivation in Britain between 1782 and 1806. But it was the younger son, George, who was to be the dominant figure in the business.²¹⁹

After 1816, the nursery embarked on its period of major development, taking advantage of the very latest in technology. This use of up to date technology was always important to the bigger commercial nurseries, as will be seen in the extensive use of cultivation under glass by some of the later men. John Claudius Loudon, the great horticulturalist and gardening writer, referred to Loddiges as ‘the Hackney Botanic Nursery Garden,’²²⁰ and it included spectacular hothouses, a tropical rain forest display and eventually an arboretum which attracted visitors from all over Europe. New steam heating was quickly exploited to create a palm house with an overhead sprinkler system. At the

²¹⁸ Edward Kemp, *The Parks, Gardens, etc., of London*, p. 170.

²¹⁹ Information about the history of Loddiges Nursery taken from David Solman, *Loddiges of Hackney, the Largest Hothouse in the World*, (London: The Hackney Society, 1995).

²²⁰ John Claudius Loudon, *Encyclopaedia of Gardening* (London: Longman, 1822) p. 1225, and quoted in David Solman, *Loddiges of Hackney* p. 39.

time it was the largest palm house in the world, pre-dating the Great Palm House at Kew by more than twenty years. By 1826 Loudon was able to list 120 species of palm that were cultivated at Loddiges, with specimens from over thirty countries. The house also contained orchids and ferns. Kemp states that at one time

this house was peopled with canaries and other birds, which ranged at full liberty within it, and must have given a great charm to it; but they were found to injure the ferns so much that they had to be removed.²²¹

By the early 1830s there was a need for even more space and Joseph Paxton designed a new palm house, using the iron sash bar and 'ridge and furrow' roof glass first invented by Loudon in 1816. This sash bar 'took the glasshouse into a new realm in terms of their capacity for light and large open spans.'²²² Paxton's palm house for Loddiges predated the one he built at Chatsworth and, of course, the Crystal Palace itself, both of which were extensions of the technique he first developed at Loddiges. Another innovation was a huge camellia house, built to a design by Loudon, using iron-framed curvilinear glazing. It became almost as famous as the palm house. In 1833 Loudon noted that the house had virtually turned into a camellia wood and 'that blackbirds have repeatedly built their nests and reared their young in it.'²²³

George Loddiges became an expert in growing orchids and the nursery was probably the first to have cultivated them commercially. The firm also specialised in exotic ferns and was influential in creating the Victorian fern craze. Another innovation, certainly for a commercial nursery, was its arboretum.²²⁴ By the mid 1820s it contained more than two and a half thousand species of hardy trees and shrubs, including roses, of which eventually it had nearly a thousand varieties. There were also herbaceous plants. And it must never be forgotten that this was a commercial enterprise – the front row

²²¹ Kemp, *The Parks, Gardens, etc., of London*, p. 171.

²²² John Hix, *The Glasshouse* (London: Phaidon, 1996), p. 28.

²²³ Quoted in Solman, *Loddiges of Hackney*, p. 39.

²²⁴ Harvey, *Early Nurserymen*, p. 89.

showed the trees and shrubs as they would grow and were not for sale, but behind them were specimens that visitors could buy. It became quite the thing to go on a visit to Loddiges to enjoy the display.²²⁵ All the plants were carefully labelled, so that potential purchasers could be certain what they were buying. Edward Kemp writes that the arboretum ‘was long regarded as the most complete in the country’ and that it ‘has been the foundation of most others of the kind throughout the country.’²²⁶

It is difficult to say how much local retail trade would have been done by such an internationally renowned firm, who supplied many of the great estates in this country and abroad, including Chatsworth and Woburn, and botanic gardens from Kew to Geneva and even as far away as Adelaide, Australia. One large local commission certainly was undertaken. In 1839, George Loddiges became a shareholder in the Abney Park Cemetery Company and was responsible for designing and planting it when it opened in 1840. The nursery lay only a few miles to the south of the site and would have had the quantities and variety of stock needed for such a large enterprise. Contrary to the expectation that a Victorian cemetery would be a dark and gloomy place, Loudon’s description of Abney Park is somewhat surprising

The most highly ornamented cemetery in the neighbourhood of London, as far as respects plants, is that of Abney Park, in which...there is a complete arboretum, including all the hardy kinds of rhododendrons, azaleas, and roses in Messrs. Loddiges’s collection; and in which also dahlias, geraniums, fuchsias, verbenas, petunias, etc., are planted out in patches in the summer season.²²⁷

By the end of the 1840s, Loddiges had to face the reality of the London building boom. Edward Kemp referred to ‘the encroachments of a rapidly-enlarging population’ and ‘the atmosphere having become so deteriorated by smoke.’²²⁸ The landlord of part of the nursery was St. Thomas’s Hospital, and the lease was due to fall in in 1853. It was

²²⁵ Ibid., p. 39.

²²⁶ Kemp, *The Parks, Gardens, etc., of London*, p. 171.

²²⁷ John Claudius Loudon, *On The Laying Out, Planting, and Managing of Cemeteries and on the Improvement of Churchyards*, (London: Longmans, 1843; repr. London: Ivelet Books, 1981), p. 22.

²²⁸ Kemp, *The Parks, Gardens, etc., of London*, p. 170.

clear that it would not be renewed – the land was far more valuable as a site for housebuilding. Conrad Loddiges the second, the third generation of the family to be associated with the nursery, realised that it would have to close and began to plan the dispersal of the nursery stock. In 1850 he offered the palms to Kew Gardens at a third of their commercial value, but even so Kew could not afford to buy them. At this stage he was still employing 11 men.²²⁹ During the summer of 1852, all the stock was auctioned off. Some things, including many species of willows, went to Victoria Park – those willows or their descendants are still there on the islands in the lake - and anything that was left in September was sold to Joseph Paxton to adorn the newly re-erected Crystal Palace in Sydenham. In 1854, the largest palm, as tall as a three-storey house, was pulled through London by a team of thirty-two horses to be the star of the show.²³⁰

Hugh Low and Company

In Upper Clapton was the establishment of Messrs. Hugh Low and Company. This nursery is the only one apart from Loddiges to the east of London to be mentioned – briefly – in Miles Hadfield's *A History of British Gardening*.²³¹ Edward Kemp visited it in 1850, pointing out that it was only two miles away from Loddiges. At this date Hugh Clapton was employing 61 men, with two of his sons as assistants.²³² Kemp stated that 'a very considerable stock of the most popular greenhouse plants is reared and kept in the best order.' He wrote that the nursery specialised in 'those plants which peculiarly suit the London market.' Like Loddiges, it had introduced some technical innovations – though nothing like those at Loddiges in scale – sliding ventilation shutters, and 'small frames and lights' within the larger houses which enabled plants to be given their own 'suitable atmosphere.' Again like Loddiges, Low's was bringing on material brought back by the plant hunters: 'we noticed a lot of seedlings collected by Drummond in the neighbourhood

²²⁹ 1851 Census, TNA/HO 107/1505/200, p. 204.

²³⁰ See Solman, *Loddiges of Hackney*, pp. 67-70.

²³¹ Hadfield, *A History of British Gardening*, p. 391.

²³² 1851 Census TNA/HO107/1503/177, p. 3.

of Lucky Bay, and between that and Swan River.’²³³ Unlike Loddiges, Low’s could boast of its own collector: ‘one of Mr. Low’s sons has been a collector of plants in Borneo and other tropical countries, and has sent home many valuable things, which are of course to be found in this establishment.’²³⁴

In 1871, the establishment was being run by one of Hugh Low’s sons, Stuart. He was employing 46 men and 14 boys and had his own son, also Stuart, as an assistant nurseryman.²³⁵ Low’s is described in the *Gardener’s Magazine* in 1880 as ‘a plant manufactory rather than a nursery as usually understood’, with no special displays to appeal to potential individual customers. ‘There is no spacious show house contiguous to the high road, and embellished with flowering and ornamental leaved plants, neither are there outdoor promenades flanked with choice specimen trees and shrubs, and otherwise made attractive to catch the eye of the wealthy residents in the district.’²³⁶ At Low’s the ‘main efforts of the large staff’ are ‘evidently devoted to the production of stocks suitable to the requirements of trade growers of such things as are in most demand.’ This necessitated a huge amount of glass but

the number of structures which have long since been sufficient to fill with astonishment any one seeing them for the first time are now being augmented by the addition of some eight or ten spacious span-roof houses, each about a hundred feet in length, which at the present moment [i.e. April 1880] are rapidly approaching completion.²³⁷

As well as growing all the normal stove and greenhouse plants, Low’s specialised in orchids. Even if this nursery produced some of the plants that would appeal to the same ‘great house’ owners as Loddiges half a century earlier, it is the only one in the East End that was on such a scale but not aimed at the private market. Five years later, they had

²³³ James Drummond, an early settler, collected plants in Western Australia and sent both plants and seeds back to England for sale and distribution.

²³⁴ Kemp, *The Parks, Gardens, etc. of London*, pp. 172-173.

²³⁵ 1871 Census TNA/RG10/312/3, p. 2.

²³⁶ *Gardener’s Magazine*, 3 Apr 1880, p. 159.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

another 'extensive establishment' at Bush Hill, Enfield, but were still going strong in Upper Clapton, where the expansion to Enfield 'had set at liberty many structures that were previously devoted to other things'²³⁸ and were now growing even more orchids, heaths, carnations and bouvardias than ever before. Horticultural writer C.W. Shaw said of establishments like Low's that 'there are no elaborately painted sign-boards, nor direction posts to make known the name of the proprietor, and the character of his stock, for as a rule visitors to such places are a hindrance rather than a help.'²³⁹

Fraser's Nursery

Nurserymen were very knowledgeable when it came to choosing a good site and choosing the plants that would best flourish there. A very important East End nursery lay on the Lea Bridge Road, near to the site of Pamplin's. This was the large nursery founded by Finley Fraser, but by mid-century belonging to his sons, J. and J. Fraser. By 1871 it was employing 145 men and 8 boys.²⁴⁰ It covered an area of dead level ground and was therefore exposed to wind, thus making it a good position in which to raise hardy outdoor specimens of roses, fruit trees and conifers. Shirley Hibberd bought some of the conifers in his garden from them.²⁴¹ This was a large-scale enterprise, growing thousands of young trees. They also grew flowering and ornamental shrubs and many varieties of rhododendrons. Around the tree plantations there were herbaceous beds. Shirley Hibberd went in February, when the beds were full of winter aconites. W.D. Prior, the rose enthusiast, visited in April and saw the roses for which the nursery was particularly famous, both in the open ground and under glass. John Fraser was on hand to show him round and explained that he was selling off a large quantity of stock that had been the source of his show items because he needed more room. They discussed the growing of roses near towns and how so many of the new houses were 'furnished with those little

²³⁸ Ibid., p. 159.

²³⁹ Shaw, *The London Market Gardens*, p. 5.

²⁴⁰ 1871 Census, TNA/RG 10/1634/107, p. 20.

²⁴¹ *Gardener's Magazine*, 14 Feb 1863, p. 49; *ibid.*, 10 Dec 1864, p. 394.

glass cupboards like small photographic studios, which the builder dignifies with the name of conservatory.²⁴² Mr Prior himself admits to having one and is planning on experimenting with roses under glass at home. George Gordon, who also wrote for the *Gardener's Magazine* and took over as editor on the death of Hibberd, visited the same nursery in August and was impressed with the display of bedding plants. There were trial beds of geraniums and verbenas and phloxes, each variety grown side by side in blocks, giving a visitor the chance to compare the merits of each. Fraser's was also abreast of gardening fashion:

At the back of the plant houses occurs a bit of panel bedding that should be seen by all who are in any way interested in flower-garden decoration. It is certainly one of the richest and most tasteful combinations yet seen, and the subjects used are mostly such as are within the reach of all.²⁴³

Fraser's also grew huge numbers of fruit trees and bushes and many varieties of other trees, especially species of conifers, which Shirley Hibberd says were 'sent out at low prices, to encourage people to put good belts to their plantations, and to help amateurs who grow conifers in pots for winter furnishing.'²⁴⁴ The conifer selection included the wellingtonia, a highly fashionable tree that had made its first appearance in England barely ten years before and which was soon 'the tree for country house gardens' with 'avenues of it wherever they could be squeezed in.'²⁴⁵ Keith Thomas points out that the 'constant desire to keep ahead of the fashion (or at least to profit by selling to those who wished to keep ahead) was one of the chief stimuli to horticultural innovation.'²⁴⁶ Fraser's nursery was very close to the River Lea and not far from Lea Bridge Station, so plants could easily be despatched to customers all over the country as well as supplying local trade.

²⁴² *Gardener's Magazine*, 7 Apr 1866, p. 157.

²⁴³ *Gardener's Magazine*, 6 Aug 1870, p. 371.

²⁴⁴ *Gardener's Magazine*, 14 Feb 1863, p. 50.

²⁴⁵ David Stuart, *The Garden Triumphant: A Victorian Legacy* (London: Viking, 1988), p. 152.

²⁴⁶ Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, p. 233.

Nurseries for ‘small customers’

The nurserymen described above were at the forefront of horticultural developments, with contacts all over the world who sent back a steady stream of new discoveries which men like Fairchild and Gordon and Loddiges grew on and then sold to the connoisseurs and owners of great estates. The names of Loddiges and Low can be found in the records of learned societies of their time and in all the histories of British gardening. However, as the middle of the nineteenth century approached, there was a change, neatly summed up by the gardening writer and journalist Shirley Hibberd (said by Miles Hadfield to be ‘a leader of what one might call the urban and suburban world of horticulture.’²⁴⁷). He described the nurseries of Stoke Newington, where he himself lived, in 1866:

The nurseries of this district have declined from the high position they once enjoyed by sheer necessity. When mansions give place to ‘terraces’ that are not terraces, and when parks consisting of grass, water, and trees are changed into ‘parks’ consisting wholly of genteel villas, the nurseries undergo a corresponding change. Hence we do not find (as might have been found years ago) extensive collections of stove plants, orchids, and fruit trees in our nurseries; and, strange to say – though it is consistent with the philosophy of the case – there are very few florists’ flowers to be met with in our nurseries, the plants of the rich and poor are non est, and our plant purveyors stick to middle-class subjects, such as geraniums, calceolarias, and the rest of the ingredients for the bedding mania.²⁴⁸

This was the time when developments in printing brought prices of newspapers and magazines down and increasingly widespread education made magazine reading a popular pastime for the middle classes and below and it was above all for them that Shirley Hibberd wrote. There were several gardening magazines available by this time, but the *Gardener’s Magazine*,²⁴⁹ which Hibberd edited, became the best selling magazine of the 1860s. Hibberd’s *Gardener’s Magazine* continued Loudon’s feature called ‘Visits to

²⁴⁷ Hadfield, *A History of British Gardening*, p. 342.

²⁴⁸ *Gardener’s Magazine*, 29 Dec 1866, p. 481. Hibberd suggests that the flowers of the rich and the flowers traditionally considered as those that would appeal to the poor, the florists’ flowers, were now ‘non-existent’ in the Stoke Newington nurseries.

²⁴⁹ Successor to an earlier *Gardener’s Magazine*, edited by John Claudius Loudon.

Nurseries' and it is from these accounts that one can build up a picture of some of the nurseries in East London. There was a concentration situated in Stoke Newington, which seems to have been just as much of a centre for plant growing in the middle of the nineteenth century as Hoxton was in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A representative sample of these nurseries is given in this section.

Writing in 1866, but quoting notes he made in 1863, Shirley Hibberd makes it clear that a nurseryman was not always the loser when houses were built:

as the population of a district increases so do the demands upon the nurseries of the districts increase, for a thousand small customers take the place of one great customer, and perhaps in the end considerably more money changes hands than when orchids and palms and caladiums are the principle things in demand.²⁵⁰

This also makes it clear that the customers of these nurseries were local – and very different from the dukes and archdukes who patronised Gurle, Gordon or Loddiges.

Hibberd wrote that the first in importance among the nurseries of Stoke Newington was the Albion Nursery, in Albion Road

it has preserved an open space and a temple of Flora in the midst of a district...where the builders have been lately eating up the land, and transforming trees into houses, with a vigour which needs to be seen to be believed. This nursery carries back the memories of the old inhabitants to the days when Stoke Newington was one of the great homes of floriculture, when growers of orchids and ferns, and alpines and dahlias, and carnations and auriculas, were as thickly strewn as we now see the villas with ten square feet of garden attached, and twenty-five geraniums and a holly making a grand display for auld-lang-syne.²⁵¹

These are the sort of gardens and their new owners that the Grossmith brothers were still satirising twenty or so years later, when the city clerk Charles Pooter moved into Brickfield Terrace, Holloway. He also had a bed of geraniums in the back garden, where on April 14th he reported spending

²⁵⁰ *Gardener's Magazine*, 20 June 1863, p. 196.

²⁵¹ *Gardener's Magazine*, 29 Dec 1866, p. 582.

the whole afternoon, having this morning picked up at a bookstall for fivepence, a capital little book, in good condition, on *Gardening*. I procured and sowed some half-hardy annuals in what I fancy will be a warm, sunny border.²⁵²

The Albion Nursery would have served this kind of customer. It was started in about 1828, when John Milne, one of the labourers working for ‘one of the great Cubitts’, who was building houses nearby, took over a disused gravel pit with a view to growing strawberries on the side and azaleas and rhododendrons in the bottom. Milne could see the possibilities in what to others was just an abandoned gravel pit. Thomas Cubitt, the great developer/builder, may have been sympathetic to the project because he himself maintained a nursery ground to supply plants and trees for his developments.²⁵³ He helped Mr. Milne get started and by the time Milne died, ‘the gravel pit had become a garden’, with ten greenhouses and a large selection of plants, including ericas, azaleas, camellias, park and garden trees and shrubs, and ‘all the stove plants and orchids then in demand.’ It became quite famous locally. The nursery then fell into incompetent hands and went swiftly downhill, until taken over by Mr. Grimby, who had originally come from Oxfordshire.²⁵⁴ He found all the greenhouses empty apart from the camellia house – camellias are hard to kill and seemed even to have benefited from the period of neglect. Mr. Grimby has ‘one of the prettiest stoves [i.e. hothouse] imaginable’ and he has

devoted himself very zealously to the furnishing of great banquets with plants and flowers, and may always be seen about the Guildhall and the Mansion House...for he takes a large share of the decoration for civic festivities, and does it so well that he might if he wished be independent of the demands of the Stoke Newington gardeners.²⁵⁵

It was a recognised part of a nurseryman’s trade at the time to ‘rent out’ pot plants, usually to aristocratic houses, and take them back when they were beginning to fade, but it

²⁵² George and Weedon Grossmith, *The Diary of a Nobody*, (Bristol: J.W. Arrowsmith, 1892; London: Pan Books, 1946), p. 23.

²⁵³ ‘I have had nurseries of several acres for upwards 30 years, the object being to have plants always ready to supply gardens either in the London Squares, or gardens for houses as they are built’. Quoted in Hermione Hobhouse, *Thomas Cubitt Master Builder* (New York: Universe Books, 1971), p. 502, note 30.

²⁵⁴ 1861 Census, TNA/RG9/152/25, p. 21.

²⁵⁵ Shirley Hibberd, ‘Albion Nursery, Stoke Newington’, *Gardener’s Magazine*, 20 June 1863, p. 196.

is interesting to know that it could be such a profitable undertaking. Hibberd gives a list of the plants that Mr. Grimbly grew for this purpose. The bulk of the plants were foliage plants, including caladiums, crotons and begonias. Grimbly also grew petunias, verbenas, zonal geraniums – two greenhouses full of them – and pelargoniums. He had small conifers and outdoor azaleas exactly the right size for suburban gardens. And he still grew strawberries on a steep slope in a remote region of the great gravel pit.²⁵⁶ By 1866 Mr. Grimbly was dead, and the nursery was run by Mr. James Kirkland, another man of Oxfordshire origins, famous as a raiser of carnations and picotees. According to the 1871 Census, Kirkland employed five men and a boy in his business.²⁵⁷

Some of the nurseries of the East of London were major concerns, growing masses of blooms for the leading London flower market in Covent Garden. A Stoke Newington nurseryman of this type was Robert Oubridge in Church Road, though he did also maintain a local retail business, of which Hibberd was a customer. Unfortunately, no census gives the number of his employees. Oubridge had been born in Durham²⁵⁸ and came south as gardener to James Foster in Stamford Hill, when he was a great exhibitor of fuchsias and chrysanthemums. He was now a champion grower of flowers for market. But there was nothing showy about his greenhouses, as described by Shirley Hibberd. They were low pitched, and built as if in holes in the ground. The paths were not tiled, there were pools of water, broken flower pots and bricks underfoot. Probably, writes Hibberd, ‘there are no greenhouses in the kingdom that have cost less to build in proportion to size, and very likely indeed there are no houses in the kingdom wherein more work, or better work, is done.’ He describes a block of pelargoniums twelve feet wide and forty feet long, all in full bloom, ‘the flame-like flowers set out on a groundwork of the most healthy and lively

²⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 196.

²⁵⁷ 1871 Census, TNA/RG 10/311/80, p. 45.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., TNA/RG 10/310/17, p. 27.

foliage imaginable.’²⁵⁹ He is writing in April 1866, but the pelargonium house has been full of flower since November, in order to supply Covent Garden with bright blooms during the darkest months of the year.

Shirley Hibberd’s article goes on to say that Robert Oubridge was also a successful grower of bulbs – crocuses, hyacinths and tulips – with the first batches being ready in the first week of January. Hibberd describes some of the tricks of the trade to get a good show in a pot. The bulbs were planted in light rich soil in boxes outdoors in September to develop good roots. The boxes were brought in around November and, still in the boxes, the bloom began to show. Then when it was possible to choose identically sized blooms they were potted on – three tulips to a pot. Good hyacinths could be chosen and potted up singly, the remaining smaller ones could be put two or three to a pot and thus still make a good display. Crocuses are put in five to a pot.²⁶⁰ Fourteen years later, in 1880, Robert Oubridge was reported as being ‘one of the most successful of trade cultivators of the poinsettia’,²⁶¹ growing several thousand plants in a broad bed of soil rather than in pots in order to cut the heads off for sending to market. He also sent out jobbing gardeners – men who worked by the day in different gardens, not employed by a single houseowner, a sure sign that the houses of the neighbourhood were not grand enough or with large enough gardens to keep a permanent gardener of their own. Todd Longstaffe-Gowan states that there were also advantages

to the friendly collaboration of nurserymen and jobbers. The benefits for the nurserymen were the percentages they recovered from their subcontractees’ wages and the promotion of their goods and services. To the gardener there were the bonuses of regular employment and income and the credibility of professionalism.²⁶²

It was quite usual for landed proprietors looking for a new gardener to contact a nursery for a recommendation, as younger men often did a stint in a nursery to gain

²⁵⁹ *Gardener’s Magazine*, 7 Apr 1866, p. 150.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 25 Dec 1880, p. 674.

²⁶² Longstaffe-Gowan, *The London Town Garden*, p. 158.

experience as they moved between situations as private gardeners. For nurserymen there was a lot more to the business than just growing plants.

On Stoke Newington High Street, opposite West Hackney Church was Adam Forsyth's Brunswick Nursery, stated by Shirley Hibberd to have been 'the headquarters of the chrysanthemum for this part of the metropolis.'²⁶³ This was a nursery aimed at the local trade. It had been a going concern when Forsyth took it over – indeed it had once been larger - but standards had not slipped. The principal display of chrysanthemums was in 'the neat small showhouse adjoining the high road' and it contained exactly what thousands of ladies and gentlemen of moderate means might have for their own private enjoyment. It was not necessary to have costly plants and lots of expensive equipment: plants might cost only sixpence or a shilling and yet with a little skill, patience and care they could be grown to 'enormous dimensions with a mountain of glorious flowers within a year'. In the show-house there was 'a central stage crowded with specimens, each with half a dozen splendid blooms. There were also low stages all round filled with superbly-grown convex specimens, in perfect training and in gorgeous richness of bloom.'²⁶⁴ Other greenhouses were full of bush, pyramid and standard pompones. However, only four years later there was a change of direction: Adam Forsyth had decided to sell off much of his stock. He must have been particularly sensitive to changing tastes, for he had opened a shop for the supply of bouquets, cut flowers and decorative plants generally, in Mount Street, Grosvenor Square, and needed more space for the cultivation of plants and flowers especially for this shop. This is still quite early for flower shops – indeed, according to Ronald Webber, even by the last decade of the century 'there were only about five high-class florist shops in London.'²⁶⁵ Given its Mayfair location, it is clear Forsyth was aiming at a wealthy clientele. No doubt he was planning to rent out pot plants and other

²⁶³ *Gardener's Magazine*, 29 Dec 1866, p. 582. Again, there is no indication here or in the 1871 Census of how many workers Forsyth employed.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁵ Webber, *The Early Horticulturalists*, p. 150.

decorations for balls or special parties. After the party, the half-dead plants returned, the nurseryman would get them back into good condition and then out they would go again – it was a very profitable business.²⁶⁶ Some time between 1871 and 1880, Adam Forsyth made yet another move – to New Zealand, where he apparently continued his mastery of chrysanthemum growing and showing, for it was reported in the *Lyttleton Times* that ‘he stood alone for the rare size, the perfection of form, and the purity of colouring he had secured.’²⁶⁷ It may be that he also had been finally driven off his land by the building fever that was continuing in Stoke Newington.

Hibberd mentions a most eccentric nursery that once stood next door to Adam Forsyth’s – that of Mr. Mackie, who specialised in camellias and mulberry trees. The camellias were grown in a ‘huge dark den’²⁶⁸ – almost opaque because of the amount of wood and the smallness of the panes in the roof. This was an extremely old-fashioned style of greenhouse by the middle of the nineteenth century – one need only compare it with the description of the camellia house in Loddiges nursery. Small-paned, wood-framed windows had been usual in the eighteenth century, before a method of producing larger panes of glass had been found and the use of cast iron in the structure had been developed. Nevertheless, in spite of the conditions the camellias grew to about twelve feet high and ten feet wide and were covered with double white flowers in the month of December ‘like huge pyramids of snow.’²⁶⁹ Mr. Mackie charged very high prices and if he sold a mulberry, insisted on planting it himself, but his customers put up with him because of the quality of the plants.²⁷⁰ It is probable that these customers were local, as the mulberry trees were planted in a row close to the public path where they could easily be

²⁶⁶ Todd Longstaffe-Gowan describes a very similar enterprise started by James Cochran fifty years earlier in 1815, with a retail shop and plant contracting business near Grosvenor Square. Cochran could supply plants for window boxes as well as for ballrooms and his shop included garden sundries. He had his own nursery but also drew on the resources of others for his stock. *The London Town Garden*, pp. 160-165.

²⁶⁷ Quoted in *Gardener’s Magazine*, 10 July 1880, p. 336.

²⁶⁸ *Gardener’s Magazine*, 29 Dec 1866, p. 582.

²⁶⁹ *Floral World*, January 1863, p. 2.

²⁷⁰ *Gardener’s Magazine*, 29 Dec 1866, p. 582.

seen by those passing by. There were still enough big houses and villas in Stoke Newington or Stamford Hill or even parts of Hackney, within a carriage drive, where such large trees could be planted. Mr. Bird, a nurseryman in Green Lanes, Stoke Newington, bought up the camellias when Mr. Mackie's stock was sold off, but seemed more proud of his other skills, saying, in 1863, that he 'believed he had shown more chrysanthemums than any other man in the country.'²⁷¹

Also in Green Lanes, John West was the proprietor of the Walnut Tree Nursery, where he had yuccas and India-rubber plants, azaleas and grape-vines. He was, according to Shirley Hibberd, best 'for a bit of anything, from a score of Collards to a thousand Caladium Chantini.'²⁷² The 1871 Census shows him employing sixteen men and a boy – three times as many as James Kirkland.²⁷³ But Mr. West was having no luck with growing *Lapageria rosea* – the Chilean Bell Flower – in pots. The writer who visited him (probably Shirley Hibberd, though the piece is unsigned) was able to advise him what he was doing wrong, and even discovered that some of the young shoots were covered in fly.²⁷⁴ Finally there was William Chitty, who had a 'neat little nursery'²⁷⁵ on the hill and was, according to Shirley Hibberd, 'the best botanist around here.'²⁷⁶ But Mr. Chitty was now doing so much work in laying out and improving that he had little time to attend to the nursery trade – another hint that the increasing number of new houses brought new kinds of opportunities to those who were ready to take advantage of them. The 1861 Census shows him as employing only one man, but by 1871 he was employing five.²⁷⁷

Some were not as lucky – in September 1863, Mr. Fry of Homerton was obliged to sell up and W.D.P. (probably W.D. Prior, a local amateur gardener who specialised in

²⁷¹ *Gardener's Magazine*, 7 Feb 1863, p. 41.

²⁷² *Floral World*, August 1861, p. 171. This is the only reference found to a nurseryman growing vegetables – collards are a type of cabbage.

²⁷³ 1871 Census, TNA/RG 10/311/23, p. 38.

²⁷⁴ *Gardener's Magazine*, 31 Dec 1864, p. 416.

²⁷⁵ *Gardener's Magazine*, 29 Dec 1866, p. 582.

²⁷⁶ *Floral World*, August 1861, p. 171.

²⁷⁷ 1861 Census TNA/RG 9/153/109, p. 8; 1871 Census TNA/RG 10/312/138, p. 20.

roses) wrote ‘few things are more disheartening to the floral enthusiast in the neighbourhood of the metropolis than the dispersion of an old-established suburban nursery before the exigencies of increasing population and the demon of bricks and mortar.’²⁷⁸ Another nurseryman who suffered from the spread of building was George Rawlings, who specialised in dahlias. At one time he was in Globe Road, Bethnal Green, but ‘in 1844 he began to cultivate the dahlia at Park Street, Stoke Newington; he was a raiser of seedlings there for twenty years.’²⁷⁹ However, the 1861 Census shows he was still living in Globe Road at that time, and it seems as if he also had his business headquarters there, merely having land for growing his dahlias in Stoke Newington, because in 1862 he issued a descriptive catalogue of dahlias from the Globe Road address.²⁸⁰ Shirley Hibberd said there was ‘one remarkable feature in this list, and that is, that the newest and best flowers are entered at the price of chickweed – at nine shillings per dozen. These dahlias will go as fast as the grower can pack and despatch them.’²⁸¹ This certainly suggests that his trade extended more widely than purely to the local gardeners. However, ‘in the course of time Stoke Newington became too thickly studded with houses to allow of the successful culture of the dahlia, and in 1864 Mr. Rawlings removed to Romford, in Essex.’²⁸² He was still in Romford in 1873, still growing dahlias, and issuing a catalogue which listed 217 varieties – proving that the dahlia was still as popular as ever.²⁸³ It also shows that, just as the market gardeners William Ivory and Joseph Roberts discussed in the following section moved from their original location but continued in business, so did this East End nurseryman.

From these examples it can be seen what a wide range of nurseries were to be found in the East End, from Mr. Chitty with one man to the Frasers with over one hundred

²⁷⁸ W.D.P., ‘Specimen Plants at the Homerton Nursery’, *Gardener’s Magazine*, 26 Sept 1863, p. 312.

²⁷⁹ *Gardener’s Magazine*, 17 Oct 1885, p. 595.

²⁸⁰ 1861 Census TNA/RG 9/256/115, p. 8.

²⁸¹ *Gardener’s Magazine*, 31 Mar 1862, p. 104.

²⁸² *Gardener’s Magazine*, 17 Oct 1885, p. 595.

²⁸³ *Gardener’s Magazine*, 7 June 1873, p. 284.

and fifty. All of the nurserymen described in this section combined catering for the local trade with various other businesses: growing for the market, selling further afield by means of catalogues, opening a florist's shop, decorating banquets, even laying out gardens. They were experts in what they did. All, apart perhaps from Mr. Mackie, seem to have been able to respond to market changes and fashions in gardening. All had nurseries that were reasonably close to thoroughfares where passing customers could easily visit them.

Smaller Scale Nurseries

Most of the men so far discussed were growers on a fairly large scale, though most of them were selling to local gardeners as well as to markets. There were quite a few more who kept nurseries on a smaller scale. Horticultural journalist C. W. Shaw wrote that

[e]verybody in London is, of course, acquainted with the numerous small florists' establishments, with their half-a-dozen or so small houses, in which are grown bedding plants wherewith to deck the gardens of suburban villas, or a few florists' flowers with which to supply a casual customer, as such places usually occupy prominent positions in important thoroughfares where they can be readily seen by passers-by.²⁸⁴

Joseph Courcha, who moved to Esmond Road, Old Ford from Bethnal Green some time in the early 1860s and established the Victoria Nursery, was probably closer to this type of nurseryman than any of the big Stoke Newington men. He was certainly 'hands on' in the work, for when he gave a lecture on the cultivation of the dahlia to the Central Society of Horticulture²⁸⁵ in May 1863 he prefaced his remarks by saying as it was the busy season he had not had 'time to prepare an essay, and shall therefore be compelled to trust entirely to memory. I shall give you merely the result of my own experience and

²⁸⁴ Shaw, *The London Market Gardens*, p. 5.

²⁸⁵ The Central Society was open to amateur and professional gardeners and met in various locations, usually off the Strand. George Glenny said that 'every gentleman's gardener and amateur ought to belong', as it was intended to protect them 'against the purchase of worthless subjects'. Membership was four shillings a year, plus one shilling entrance to the meetings. *Gardener's Magazine*, 2 Jan 1860, p. 11. Nathan Cole, a nurseryman who became Head Gardener of Kensington Gardens, wrote later recommending it 'to the inhabitants of the metropolis; and it is pleasing to see what a love for flowers has sprung up among the artisans of London, and astonishing to see to what perfection they can grow them'. *Gardener's Magazine*, 27 June 1863, p. 202.

practice, and my remarks will be as brief as possible.²⁸⁶ A year before, the *Gardener's Magazine* had written of one of his catalogues that 'we doubt if any other list contains so large a number of new varieties...and we advise collectors of fuchsias, verbenas and chrysanthemums to obtain it...as all the best flowers in each class of 1862 are to be found here.'²⁸⁷ The following year he had 'the best of the old sorts of every kind of florists' flowers.'²⁸⁸ Florists' flowers were thought to appeal especially to working class growers: they were a narrow range of hardy plants – auriculas, carnations, pinks, ranunculus, anemones, hyacinths, and tulips. A florist was always striving to meet the very strict standards set down for the form and colour of each bloom.²⁸⁹ Mr. Kendall, a florist, said that a florist did not like nature 'en dishabillé [sic]'²⁹⁰ – it had to be primped and dressed to reach the perfection demanded.

William Holmes, of the Frampton Nursery, Well Street, Hackney, issued a descriptive catalogue of chrysanthemums, dahlias, fuchsias, verbenas, geraniums, etc. He was said to be

not only a dealer, but a grower and exhibitor, and with the sharp eye of an experienced judge he has weeded the list of chrysanthemums etc. and retained only the cream for himself and his customers. The list is valuable for its brevity, for it comprises all the best varieties, and gives no place to those of middling or indifferent quality.²⁹¹

Mr. Holmes's catalogue included clear directions for cultivation of the chrysanthemums, and indications which were the best for specimen plants and which were best for cut flowers. In May 1865, Mr. Batten's nursery in Brook Street, Upper Clapton,

²⁸⁶ *Gardener's Magazine*, 16 May 1863, pp. 154-155.

²⁸⁷ *Gardener's Magazine*, 8 Sept 1862, p. 288.

²⁸⁸ *Gardener's Magazine*, 21 Mar 1863, p. 92.

²⁸⁹ See Hadfield, *A History of British Gardening*, pp. 262-267.

²⁹⁰ Quoted in Hadfield, *A History of British Gardening*, p. 263. Probably the Mr. Kendall quoted is the proprietor of the nursery in Queen Elizabeth Walk, Stoke Newington.

²⁹¹ *Gardener's Magazine*, 31 Mar 1862, p. 104.

was 'gay with tulips...as one of the oldest growers, and an experienced judge, Mr. Batten's collection will always attract the cultivators of this noble flower.'²⁹²

It was not only Mr. Batten who was involved in local shows. For example, Joseph Courcha was treasurer of the Tower Hamlets Floricultural Society and John Fraser always sent magnificent displays 'not for competition' to the local shows. It was obviously in their own interest to maintain good relations with potential customers. Indeed, horticultural journalist George Glenny stated that 'some hundreds and thousands of pounds are expended with the florists, nurserymen and seedsmen of London and suburbs, in a single season, and...these local societies cause a good deal of the expenditure.'²⁹³ The nurserymen were often members of show committees. It seems clear that the community of East End gardeners, amateurs and professionals, was a fairly close one, and although, as pointed out in the preceding chapter, there were at least five separate floricultural or horticultural societies in the neighbourhood, they often exhibited at each other's shows and helped out with loans of plants. The Head Gardener of Victoria Park used to lend foliage plants from the greenhouse in the Park to act as a backdrop to the show entries. The Park itself, with its fantastic annual displays of bedding out, was an inspiration to all who gardened nearby and, it seems, a source of potential custom for the nurserymen. In an era before cheap colour printing of catalogues and gardening magazines, the only way to be sure what a plant looked like was to see it growing. The author of a letter to the *Gardener's Magazine* writes of looking out for a particular variety of calceolaria in Victoria Park.²⁹⁴ Shirley Hibberd was impressed that all the plants in the park were carefully labelled and recommended visitors to go round with a notebook and pencil and

²⁹² *Gardener's Magazine*, 20 May 1865, p. 34.

²⁹³ *East London Observer*, 5 Nov 1864, p. 3.

²⁹⁴ *Gardener's Magazine*, 15 Aug 1863, p. 264.

then go off to the local nurseries to obtain the things that had particularly appealed to them.²⁹⁵

In spite of the never-ending expansion of housing, several of the nurseries discussed that were open in the 1860s were still flourishing towards the end of the century. Mr. William Holmes, son of the first William Holmes of the Frampton Park Nursery, Hackney, who had sent out his catalogue in 1862, was running the establishment in 1880. He had obviously expanded outside the mere growing of plants. He is reported as laying out and planting the Whitechapel Recreation Ground ‘in an eminently satisfactory manner.’²⁹⁶ He was still active in 1890, when Vauxhall Park was opened. ‘The planting and general arrangement of the grounds, on which much praise was bestowed, has been carried out by Mr. William Holmes.’²⁹⁷ Others were less successful: Mr. Batten, who had had gay tulip grounds in Upper Clapton in 1865, was fifteen years later, at the age of seventy-three, looking to the support of the Gardeners’ Royal Benevolent Fund.²⁹⁸

In February 1885, Mr. B. S. Williams, of the Victoria Nurseries, Holloway – again, a little farther north than the core area under discussion – received a royal warrant appointing him nurseryman to H.R.H. the Prince of Wales, and in August the same year the Metropolitan Board of Works accepted his tender to supply ‘the parks and gardens under their jurisdiction with hyacinths, tulips, and other spring-flowering bulbs.’ In October it was announced that he would supply the flowers for the Lord Mayor’s Banquet, following in the footsteps of Mr. Grimby twenty years before.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁵ *Gardener’s Magazine*, 15 Aug 1863, p. 257.

²⁹⁶ *Gardener’s Magazine*, 3 July 1880, p. 322.

²⁹⁷ *Gardener’s Magazine*, 12 July 1890, p. 406. It is, however, stated by Elizabeth Crawford that Fanny Wilkinson designed the layout of the park ‘with help from Mr. Holmes, the gardener, and C. Harrison Townsend, the Kyrle Society’s surveyor’, neither of whom are mentioned in the *Gardener’s Magazine*. Elizabeth Crawford, *Enterprising Women: The Garretts and Their Circle* (London: Francis Boutle, 2002), p. 222.

²⁹⁸ *Gardener’s Magazine*, 30 Oct 1880, p. 538.

²⁹⁹ *Gardener’s Magazine*, 14 Feb 1885, p. 78; *ibid.*, 22 Aug 1885, p. 462; *ibid.*, 24 Oct 1885, p. 606.

It is quite clear that some of these nineteenth century nurseries on the eastern fringes of London were on a very large scale and were highly thought of, and yet in most histories of gardening they are not mentioned. In several cases they were family businesses, handed on from father to son – the Lows, the Frasers, the Rawlings, the Oubridges and the Holmes are examples of this. In this they are comparable with the silkweavers of Spitalfields described in Hilda Kean and Bruce Wheeler's article, in which they make it clear that the craft often ran in families.³⁰⁰ The skills of gardening were also often handed on from one person to another and it would be quite natural for a father to teach his son who would then in due course take over the business. It is true that they were not adventurous scientists and botanists like the Tradescants, or Fairchild or Conrad Loddiges, but they were highly skilled gardeners and their efforts were appreciated by the many thousands of inhabitants of East London. Their support of the floricultural society shows certainly suggests that they kept up their links with the local community. But, like the market gardeners, their land use was threatened by the continuing urban expansion throughout the century.

Market Gardens.

'That branch of horticulture known as market gardening has through the ages, been the least publicised of any,'³⁰¹ wrote Ronald Webber, and Malcolm Quick has called it 'the Cinderella of garden history,'³⁰² yet the growth of cities meant that a literally vital industry developed to supply the growing populations who no longer had land available on which to produce their own food. Growers set up in the suburbs to supply fresh fruit and vegetables to the citizens. Webber claimed that 'London had probably the first true market

³⁰⁰ Kean and Wheeler, 'Making History in Bethnal Green', p. 219.

³⁰¹ Webber, *The Early Horticulturalists*, p. 172.

³⁰² Thick, *The Neat House Gardens*, p. 11.

gardeners.³⁰³ Although the main developments were to the west of London, there were plenty of gardens to the east also. Peter Atherall states that by the mid-eighteenth century ‘market gardens were a familiar feature of the eastern fringes of London...gardens were widespread from Limehouse to Hackney.’³⁰⁴ Even by the end of the eighteenth century, as can be seen from Milne’s *Land Use Map*, published in 1800, there had been very little building development and many market gardens remained among the arable fields and pasture.³⁰⁵ Plots were often quite small, but the skill of the market gardeners, with their heavy use of manure, both on their fields and in the creation of hotbeds, and often glass, meant that they could produce crops out of season when demand from the fashionable was strong. Edward Kemp commented in 1851

Perhaps in no one department is English gardening carried to a higher excellence, or managed with more method and skill, than is to be witnessed in the market gardens which supply the metropolis.³⁰⁶

As Joan Thirsk writes ‘The excellent soils in use around London were recognized as being man-made, and so long as town manure was available to maintain fertility, more such soils could continue to be manufactured.’³⁰⁷ One need only think of the number of horses on the streets of London to understand that a ready supply of manure was easily obtainable. It is clear from the number of people involved in the trade in the comparatively small area needed for the formation of Victoria Park that market gardening was important in a part of London not usually associated with horticulture in any form. It also shows that in 1840 there was still plenty of open space in the East End, but that space was not necessarily open to the public.

³⁰³ Webber, *The Early Horticulturalists*, p. 12.

³⁰⁴ Peter Atherall, ‘The Displacement of Market Gardening Around London by Urban Growth from 1745-1939’ (unpublished M.Litt. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1976), p. 84.

³⁰⁵ Milne’s *Plan of the Cities of London and Westminster, circumjacent Towns and Parishes etc., laid down from a Trigonometrical Survey taken in the years 1795-1799* (London: Thomas Milne, 1800; repr. London: London Topographical Society Publications, 1976).

³⁰⁶ Kemp, *The Parks, Gardens, etc., of London*, p. 190.

³⁰⁷ Joan Thirsk, *Alternative Agriculture: A History from the Black Death to the Present Day* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), p. 171.

Market gardeners achieved a high percentage of profit on a minimal acreage. In 1860, Shirley Hibberd wrote in the *Floral World* of ‘choice spots near London that show the finest market gardens in the world,’ suggesting that by merely looking at them you would have no idea of their worth ‘until you saw the grower’s books, and found, that from a single acre of ground, he would realize from a hundred and fifty to three hundred pounds per annum for produce.’³⁰⁸ If the gardener could work it himself, perhaps with the help of his family, and gained even the lower of the sums Shirley Hibberd proposed, this would give him an income well within what Charles Booth considered sufficient to put someone in the ‘comfortable’ class in his later survey of the *Life and Labour of the People in London*.³⁰⁹

Getting the produce to market quickly and in tip-top condition – which would command the highest prices – was an important consideration. Although Spitalfields Market had received its charter in 1681, and Covent Garden was the main fruit, flower and vegetable market for the whole of London, it is likely that many of the market gardens discussed here were too small to have made use of either. John Claudius Loudon wrote, in 1822, that from ‘small gardens in the immediate vicinity of the metropolis nothing is sent to market; as watercress, radishes, parsley, herbs, and flowers are the chief articles grown, and they are sold in small quantities on the spot.’³¹⁰ Street markets and costermongers would otherwise have been an important method of selling. Costermongers obtained produce both from the wholesale markets and from the gardens that did not use the central markets. Henry Mayhew, in Volume I of *London Labour and the London Poor*, discusses the large quantities of fruit and vegetables that were sold by the costermongers, either from fixed stalls or from a cart that went out on a route to sell to householders. Just as with the

³⁰⁸ *Floral World*, July 1858, p. 158.

³⁰⁹ Booth, *Life and Labour of the People In London: 1st Series Poverty* rev. edn (London: Macmillan, 1902).

³¹⁰ Quoted in Webber, *Early Horticulturalists*, p. 138.

nurseries, the growth of suburban housing provided a new source of custom from those who, for whatever reason, did not buy from street markets.³¹¹

It is possible to learn more about such small market gardens as Loudon described by studying the papers relating to the creation of Victoria Park. There were several market gardens on both of the potential sites that were considered by James Pennethorne, Architect to the Office of Woods and Forests. He described the area around Bow Common (his preferred, southern, site) as being ‘almost entirely...Meadow and Garden ground.’ He mentioned various factories around the edge of the site, many of which produced noxious smoke and smells – a reminder of the difficulties under which the market gardeners produced their crops. He then described, briefly, the northern site

the Freehold is vested in about twelve individuals and perhaps one third is let to Market Gardeners, another third as Grazing Land, and the remainder as Arable Land – but part of the grazing land at the West end is now worked as a Brickfield by Mr. Ridge.³¹²

As soon as the northern site had been chosen, the work of acquiring the land began. The Commissioners of Woods and Forests had to compensate the leaseholders, as well as purchasing the land outright from the freeholders. It is the correspondence associated with taking over the market garden land that casts some light on the size of holdings, the crops grown and the diversity of people involved in market gardening.

There was only one man in the group to be displaced who owned his own land. John Ridge had about 24 acres and had been there for just under fifty years. In a letter from James Pennethorne dated 16th October 1843 it is stated that he was in addition the sub-tenant of William Carter for nine acres of land, property of Sir John Cass’s Trustees.³¹³ It may be argued that Ridge was not a market gardener, as his main crop was mangel

³¹¹ Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, Vol I, sections on Costermongers, pp. 4-61; Street Sellers of Fruit and Vegetables, pp. 79-96; Stationary Street Sellers of Fish, Fruit and Vegetables, pp. 96-104; Street Sellers of Trees, Shrubs, Flowers, Roots, Seeds, and Branches, pp. 130-144.

³¹² Victoria Park Papers, MBW/OW/VP/001, London Metropolitan Archives, London.

³¹³ Ibid.

worzels, which are predominantly used for animal food. This may well have been needed by the large numbers of cattle being driven in to Smithfield, which would have been rested on the grazing land before the last part of the journey. The fact that he also ran a brickfield on what had been arable land suggests that he already realised that a greater profit could be made from supplying the local building boom – it was often the case that if suitable clay was available, bricks were made locally to where they would be used.

The other men (and one woman), nine persons in all, were undoubtedly market gardeners, with landholdings that were all under twenty acres in extent, the majority being under ten acres. Yet these were obviously lucrative businesses, and when they were bought out they received compensation of anything from £668 to more than £1600. Those people that have been traced in the census records seem to have been middle-aged, well settled on their land. As already mentioned, John Ridge had been there for nearly fifty years, and several others had been there for some time. As with so many other small businesses at the time, several of the market gardens were family affairs. William Ivory had three sons working with him.³¹⁴ Mary Roberts' son was also a 'market gardener'.³¹⁵

The tenant of one of the larger holdings was Finlay Fraser, of Fraser's Nursery on Lea Bridge Road. It is interesting that though his is one of the largest holdings, it is only valued at £826 18s. As Mr. Fraser was a nurseryman it is likely that this extra land was used by him for nursery stock rather than being a genuine market garden, but as Ronald Webber points out '[t]he professions of market gardener and nurseryman have always overlapped.'³¹⁶ The comparatively low valuation is a further reason for believing it to have been used for nursery stock rather than the more immediately valuable food crops.³¹⁷

³¹⁴ 1841 Census, TNA/HO 107/699/4, p. 35.

³¹⁵ Ibid., TNA/HO 107/699/4, p. 48.

³¹⁶ Webber, *History of Market Gardening*, p. 65.

³¹⁷ Victoria Park Papers, MBW/OW/VP/001.

Another of the men, John Greig, tenant of only eight acres, described himself as ‘florist’ as well as a market gardener. He submitted a very detailed account of what compensation he thought he was entitled to, among which he wrote of ‘the collection of flowers, stock, and crop of fruit, vegetables, herbs etc and seeds on and in the said land and premises.’³¹⁸ This shows the variety of produce that a market gardener could grow on a small acreage. Greig makes no mention of greenhouses or glass, so it is likely that his flowers were grown out of doors for sale to the market traders. C.W. Shaw writes ‘these kind of plants are grown in small, out-of-the-way gardens, as well as in large fields; they are generally grown very roughly, the aim being simply to sell them, without any attention being paid to their good or bad qualities.’³¹⁹ This is what would set a market gardener who grew flowers apart from a true nurseryman. James Cuthill writes that ‘it was at one time considered by market gardeners to be beneath their notice to grow flowers, but now they all do so.’³²⁰ No doubt they were ready to change as it became clear there was profit in flowers as well as vegetables.

The only woman tenant, Mrs. Mary Roberts, held one of the largest acreages. She was fifty-five in 1841, living with her six children, including her market gardener son Joseph aged twenty-five.³²¹ All the correspondence shows that arrangements for compensation and other matters were addressed to Mrs. Roberts, suggesting that she herself was in charge of the business, not her son. No other references have yet been found for a woman running a horticultural business in the area in the period studied.³²²

³¹⁸ Victoria Park Papers, MBW/OW/VP/001.

³¹⁹ Shaw, *The London Market Gardens*, p. 5.

³²⁰ James Cuthill, *Market Gardening: Giving in Detail the Various Methods Adopted by Gardeners in Growing for the London Markets*. 4th edn (London: Groombridge & Sons, 1870), p. 3.

³²¹ 1841 Census TNA/HO 107/699/4, p. 48.

³²² Victoria Park Papers, MBW/OW/VP/001.

One of the youngest leaseholders, Alexander Leighton, was forty in 1841,³²³ born in Scotland like many gardeners who ended up working in the south, nurseryman Robert Oubridge being another.³²⁴ He claimed for

a Brick built dwelling house two square stories high, and the Appurtenances belonging thereto, including Stables, Gig House or Cart Shed, Large Packing Shed and every convenience for a Market Gardener's Business.

This again suggests a reasonably substantial enterprise. In the eventual settlement he was to be allowed 'to sell or remove the whole of my Crops, Fixtures, Fittings and Utensils of trade.' Leighton was anxious that once an agreement had been made things should move quickly

It is an object to me to get the business settled in order that, by knowing the extent of my resources, I may be able to look for other premises that will come within my means.

The Office of Woods and Forests recognised that the settlement should take into account 'the difficulty and expense of procuring another equally advantageous situation for his business.'³²⁵ This was already a problem in 1843, and was even worse by the time C.W. Shaw wrote in 1879

In the more immediate neighbourhood of London market gardening is considerably on the decrease, owing to the land being required for building and other purposes. Moreover, land close to London has now become so valuable, that market gardeners are unwilling to pay the heavy rents required for it; and now that the means of transit are so complete, goods can be sent to London from twenty miles, or even greater distances off, at very little expense. Hence it is that vegetable and fruit gardens are gradually getting further from London every year.³²⁶

In the event, the census for 1851 shows Alexander Leighton had moved as far as Somerset, where he is still listed as a gardener.³²⁷ Ronald Webber states that Cornwall and the south west had had a flourishing export market for early potatoes since the beginning of the nineteenth century, joined in the 1830s by cauliflowers and in the 1860s by

³²³ 1841 Census, TNA/HO 107/699/4, p. 27.

³²⁴ John Harvey wrote 'English horticulture has owed a great debt to the northern kingdom.' *Early Nurserymen*, p. 11.

³²⁵ Victoria Park Papers, MBW/OW/VP/001.

³²⁶ Shaw, *London Market Gardens*, p. 1.

³²⁷ 1851 Census, TNA/HO 107/1937/94, p. 31.

strawberries.³²⁸ Although not absolute proof that Leighton had moved first to Essex, as many others did, his youngest child (aged four in 1851) had been born in Walthamstow.

The major worry of all the market gardeners was that the crops should not be wasted if they had to leave at short notice. They stressed in their letters how they had spent large sums on manuring the land; these were highly productive plots, not just rough grazing. The Government Solicitor, who was responsible for negotiating the compensation claims, wrote of 'many anxious meetings' with Alexander Leighton, 'occasioned mainly by the dread of the waste of the Crops.' John Cater, who had worked his land for many years, was told to be ready to leave by March 1844. He complained that to leave before June would 'cause him damage' and was told in a curt letter that he was receiving public money to compensate him for exactly that eventuality. Nevertheless the Board were not totally unsympathetic and he was assured he would not be 'wantonly disturbed' on 1st March but that he must be prepared, like all the other tenants, to go if the land was needed. In the event, though negotiations had been started in 1843, it was not until later in 1844 that most of them had to move out. John Greig, who had been assisting the Government Solicitor with his negotiations, wrote on 3rd October to James Pennethorne

Mrs. Roberts gave up possession of her house and gardens yesterday evening and brought the Key of the House to me. Going over the Premises immediately afterwards I found several persons taking away some of the vegetable produce without having purchased from Mrs. Roberts. Those persons I desired to leave the gardens and to refrain from further trespassing thereon but this morning I found some of them there and was obliged to threaten the interference of the Police before they would quit. I beg also to inform you that Mr. King the Auctioneer was with Mrs. Roberts immediately before her departure and claimed the unsold lots left after the sales in the gardens as his property.'³²⁹

Local people had obviously moved swiftly to take what they could, before Mr. King could make good his claim.

³²⁸ Webber, *Early Horticulturalists*, p. 24.

³²⁹ Victoria Park Papers, MBW/OW/VP/001.

Although those market gardeners who lost their land to Victoria Park had to move out by the mid-Forties, two at least did not leave the locality but re-established themselves a little further to the south, near Bow Common. The 1851 census shows William Ivory³³⁰ and Joseph Roberts (son of Mary)³³¹ still in business, but now in Bromley. William Ivory's son John was still in Bromley in 1861, according to that year's census,³³² but his father and older brother had moved out to West Ham and were still working there as market gardeners.³³³ The eastern side of Bow Common, which James Pennethorne had warned in 1841 would soon be covered by housing or factories if it was not acquired for his planned park, was still largely occupied by market gardens, as shown on *Stanford's Library Map* published in 1862.³³⁴ The same map shows that there were still market gardens around Victoria Park. It is clear that only those directly affected by the creation of the park had to go. East of the Kingsland Road and north of London Fields, most open land is designated 'market gardens'. As was also the case with the nurserymen considered in the previous section, to lose one's land in one place did not mean that one automatically lost one's livelihood. It was possible to find a new location a little further out which had not yet been overtaken by the building boom and serve the new customers that the very boom had brought.

Stanford's Library Map shows another large market garden area just north of the East India Docks, extending eastwards to Bow Creek and it seems that the men here were able to hold out until the 1870s. Two brief eye-witness accounts survive. The first is from a Mr. W.H. Fairbairns. He was born in Poplar in 1852 and moved in 1855 to 228 Brunswick Road in Bromley by Bow – 'dear, charming, beautiful Bromley! I can see it all now with its trees, its blackbirds and thrushes, its fields, its lovely gardens...A sweet

³³⁰ 1851 Census, TNA/HO 107/1555/467, p. 19.

³³¹ Ibid., TNA/HO 107/1555/471, p. 3.

³³² 1861 Census, TNA/RG 9/302/67, p. 27.

³³³ Ibid., TNA/RG 9/1059/68, p. 6.

³³⁴ See Item 3 in folder. It is stated by the Map Department of the British Library to have been surveyed shortly before publication and can be taken as accurate.

country place to which our town friends came for refreshment.³³⁵ He remembers the fruit trees, shrubs and flowers in his own garden and the beautiful dark paeony in the front garden of the house next door.³³⁶ He also remembers that next to No. 230 there was a field ‘in which rhubarb generally grew’ and opposite his own house

were market gardens – Radford’s – and most of the land around I suppose was in the same holding. I seem to remember Messrs. Radford, brothers, as kindly, courteous, gentlemen. They lived about where now Venue Street meets Spey Street in a nice house surrounded with trees, and overlooking part of their land. From Bromley Hall to the Cooperage footway there was a low, close, tarred fence. So from our house we overlooked the whole field, in which I remember radishes, cauliflower, onions etc. growing in successive crops.³³⁷

The business described by Mr. Fairbairns was large enough to require a manager, Mr. Roberts, ‘like the conventional drawing of John Bull’ who ‘wore boots with wonderfully square toes.’³³⁸ This portrait has a literary counterpart in an essay by Charles Dickens in *Sketches by Boz*, in which, inspired by the sight of a shop full of second hand boots and shoes, he describes a typical market gardener

There was one pair of boots in particular – a jolly, good-tempered, hearty-looking pair of tops, that excited our warmest regard; and we had got a fine, red-faced, jovial fellow of a market gardener into them, before we had made their acquaintance half a minute. They were just the very thing for him. There were his huge fat legs bulging over the tops, and fitting them too tight to admit of his tucking in the loops he had pulled them on by; and his knee-cords with an interval of stocking; and his blue apron tucked up round his waist; and his red neckerchief and blue coat, and a white hat stuck on one side of his head; and there he stood with a broad grin on his great red face, whistling away, as if any other idea but that of being happy and comfortable had never entered his brain.

This was the very man after our own heart; we knew all about him; we had seen him coming up to Covent-garden in his green chaise-cart, with the fat tubby little horse, half a thousand times.³³⁹

³³⁵ W. H. Fairbairns, ‘Poplar and Bromley 1852-1864’, *East London Papers*, 5 (1962), p. 37.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

³³⁹ Charles Dickens, ‘Meditations in Monmouth Street’, *Sketches by Boz* (London: Penguin Books, 1995) p. 102. It seems that a blue apron was part of the traditional dress of a gardener. There are references in the *Gardener’s Magazine* to this apron, and indeed one of the anonymous contributors signed himself ‘The Man In The Blue Apron’.

Farmer Radford, though, had ‘market carts with a team of three splendid horses’,³⁴⁰ rather than one tubby pony. The 1861 Census shows him as employing 70 labourers and 3 boys, so it must have been quite a sizeable enterprise, though market gardening was more labour intensive than farming.³⁴¹ Ronald Webber describes an 80 acre market garden only a little further east than this, in which were grown ‘radish, mint, seakale, horse radish, parsley, lettuce, marrows, cucumbers, spring onions, cauliflower, celery and a quantity of moss roses.’ There were 46 acres of celery, which ‘had a high reputation and was the only vegetable that he bothered to send as far as Covent Garden, the remainder going either to Spitalfields or the Borough.’³⁴²

A second memoir, that of J. Ford (who died in 1923), describes the extent of the Radford lands, which ‘commenced at the bottom end of St. Leonard’s Road facing Currie’s distillery and ran the whole length of St. Leonard’s Road as far as the ‘St. Leonard’s Arms’.’³⁴³ A map of 1863 shows this area as ‘Mr. Radford’s Gardens’.³⁴⁴ Mr. Ford then goes on to describe a second large area of land ‘the other side of Brunswick Road from the Manor House to Abbott Road. In this part of the garden stood a large wooden store-house for the garden produce which the wagons conveyed to market’. Mr. Ford states that the Radford house ‘was a large building with beautiful palisades and iron gates ... at the back stood four gardeners’ cottages.’³⁴⁵ There was a pig farm and a dairy farm adjoining the market gardens – no doubt a good source of manure. The dairy farm also grew vegetables that were sold to local customers – presumably this was on too small a scale to warrant sending any to market.

Further south were the East India Docks, and Mr. Ford describes the area just north of the Dock wall. ‘About twelve cottages with long gardens in front stood along here, and

³⁴⁰ Fairbairns, ‘Poplar and Bromley 1852-1864’, p. 42.

³⁴¹ 1861 Census TNA/RG 9/302/41, p. 11.

³⁴² Webber, *The History of Market Gardening*, p. 119.

³⁴³ J. Ford, ‘Bromley In The Sixties’, *East London Papers*, 7 (1964), p. 63.

³⁴⁴ Victoria Park Papers, MBW/OW/VP/008.

³⁴⁵ Ford, ‘Bromley In The Sixties’, p. 63.

then Salter's Farm was reached. This, too, was a market garden, and the vegetables were despatched by cart to market.³⁴⁶ The 1851 Census shows that Mr Salter's operation was very different from that of Mr Ratford. He only had five acres and employed one man.³⁴⁷ In the 1860s, the built up area only reached the westernmost part of the East India Docks. All the land opposite the long northern wall of the dock was still open fields.

It is very difficult to find documents that give the actual value of the businesses of the market gardeners. The Victoria Park Papers give the amount of compensation paid to those who surrendered their land and the amounts paid suggest that the land and crops were worth quite large sums of money, as suggested by Shirley Hibberd. Some of the valuation lists for the parish of Bromley, Poplar Union³⁴⁸ survive, and through them it is possible to trace in some detail the land worked by 'Farmer Radford' – known in the lists as Isaac Ratford – and Moses Salter. The valuation list is a different type of official document, but it too suggests that the market gardens in this area were valuable. The lists do not give acreages, but only the gross estimated rent and the rateable value. Rateable value, as this is definite, has been used when considering the relative amounts of property worked.

In the list of 1865 there are seven entries for Isaac Ratford, one for James Ratford and one for Moses Salter. James Ratford appears as the occupier of a house – Manor Field House – owned by D. McIntosh with a rateable value of £28. Moses Salter occupies a house and land on Barking Road, also owned by McIntosh, with a rateable value of £36 – somewhat surprising if he only had five acres. Isaac Ratford's holding is not unified. He leases property owned by three different people: Elizabeth Ram, Rain and D. McIntosh. The property is in three blocks: the Ram and Rain land is near Bow Common and Tower Hamlets Cemetery and the McIntosh land consists of one block near St. Leonard's Road

³⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 63.

³⁴⁷ 1851 Census TNA/HO 107/1555/262, p. 20.

³⁴⁸ Valuation List BOW/765-773, Tower Hamlets Local History Library, London.

(that described by Mr. Fairbairns) and another near the Barking Road (as described by Mr. Ford). The Ram land, described as ‘market garden’, has a rateable value of £29 and the two Rain pieces, described as ‘garden ground’ and ‘land’, have rateable values of £61 and £23 respectively. The McIntosh land near St. Leonard’s Road has a rateable value of £100. Isaac Ratford also owns a ‘house, yard and stables’ – the next entry to the above – with a rateable value of £36. He also occupies two blocks of McIntosh land near the Barking road. The first, described as ‘house, land, barns and stables’, has a rateable value of £136, and the second, described as ‘garden ground’ has a rateable value of £44. Thus Isaac Ratford has land and buildings with a total rateable value of £439, and if one includes the house occupied by James Ratford, the two brothers are rated on a value of £467 – a sizeable amount, showing how valuable well-maintained market garden land near London was.³⁴⁹ The *Stanford Library Map* clearly shows a farm – McIntosh’s farm – in the middle of the market garden area near the Barking Road. It is not possible to tell whether this is the ‘house, land, barns and stables’ referred to as occupied by Isaac Ratford or a separate dwelling. (There is no other large building in the area, however.) It is definitely not the house referred to by Mr. Fairbairns as the one in which the Ratford brothers actually lived.

The same map shows that Ratford’s Bow Common land is crossed by the Blackwall Extension Railway, off which branches the London, Tilbury and Southend Railway. The land is bordered to the east by the North London Railway. Again a passage by Charles Dickens, from *Our Mutual Friend* of 1864, suggests its appearance. He describes

that district of the flat country tending to the Thames, where Kent and Surrey meet, and where the railways still bestride the market gardens that will soon die under them...a medley of black ditch, sparkling cucumber frame, rank field, richly-cultivated kitchen garden, brick viaduct, arch-spanned canal, and disorder of frowziness and fog.³⁵⁰

³⁴⁹ Valuation List BOW/765-773, Tower Hamlets Local History Library.

³⁵⁰ Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1997) p. 205.

Dickens is writing about a landscape south of the river, but these East London fringes must have been very similar.

A complete run of valuation lists has not survived, but there are some for the parish of Bromley St. Leonard in the 1870s³⁵¹ through which it is possible to trace Isaac Ratford's lands near Barking Road. In 1870 he is shown as occupying 'house and land' (still owned by McIntosh) at 391 Barking Road, at first given a rateable value of £235 but increased after the Assessment Committee had considered it to £274. Even if this is for both his holdings, it still shows an increase of £94 in five years. Moses Salter's land, at 383 Barking Road, has a rateable value of £58 (£22 more than in 1865). D. McIntosh appears in this list as the owner/occupier of house and land in Brunswick Road with a rateable value of only £29.

The later lists show that by 1874 there has been a major change. House and land near Barking Road now is described as: occupier – late Ratford; owner – late McIntosh. As in the 1876 list McIntosh is still listed as owner of other land, this must mean only that Ratford's land has been sold rather than that either man has died. (In 1875, the occupier of Manor Field House is William Goad rather than James Ratford.) The land has been divided between five men as occupiers, including Moses Salter and William Goad, and the owner is now Abbott. Rateable values of the various holdings range from £109 to £7 – the latter being that of Moses Salter. By 1875, Mr. Abbott has already begun building houses and in succeeding years the other men who bought land are also doing the same. In 1877, Mr. McIntosh is listed as 'house and sheds, Bromley Hall, pulled down and land being built on'. In 1878, Charles Salter (perhaps the son of Moses) is building on his land. Bacon's map of c. 1898 shows the whole area of market garden land now covered in

³⁵¹ Valuation List BRO/175-179, Tower Hamlets Local History Library.

streets and a large Gas Works.³⁵² This is the clearest possible indication of the loss of open space to houses and factories.

The Ordnance Survey Map of 1870 suggests that a good proportion of the market garden land near Bow Common has also been built on. The land north of Victoria Park itself, which is shown in 1862 as ‘market gardens’ has disappeared by 1870. It is probable that these market gardens would have been let informally, under short leases, until the builders were ready to use the land. As the building boom spread out eastwards, it no doubt became clear to the landowners that their land was even more valuable as sites for housebuilding than as market gardens. The market gardeners moved out further east and by the end of the century there were no more market gardens west of the River Lea.

Conclusion

Both nurseries and market gardens were vulnerable to the rising value of land needed for house building as London expanded. However, both also could profit from the new custom such houses brought. Nurseries which had once catered only for the great estates were replaced by those who produced subjects suitable for the smaller villa gardens – but they did not have to go out of business until, like Loddiges, the land they leased became too valuable to the landowner to continue to let it for cultivation. Had their land not been required for Victoria Park, it is likely that the market gardeners discussed in the preceding section would have been able to stay for many more years. However, when the moment came, it was often possible to move further out and continue in business, as both East End nurserymen and market gardeners did. Theirs was not in any sense a failing trade. The men described in the preceding sections were not poor. They add one more

³⁵² *Bacon's large-print map of London and Suburbs with guide.* (London: G.W. Bacon, n.d.), BL.I/1880. Institute for Historical Research, London.

challenge to what Marc Brodie has called the ‘unquestioning acceptance of the complete dominance of casualized, poverty-ridden forms of employment in the area.’³⁵³

Until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, much of the East End was close to open countryside. It is true that the core area nearest to the City was overcrowded and contained many airless courts and much poor quality housing, but it should not be forgotten that as well as polluting factories there were market gardens and nurseries. Both these were trades that were not threatened by new machines, unlike the silkworkers or the tailors – though Hilda Kean and Bruce Wheeler point out that even in those cases one must not make the mistake of believing that modernisation drove all of these workers to destitution, for they were able to adapt and survive.³⁵⁴ Market gardeners and nurserymen could also adapt reasonably quickly to new fashions in planting or new tastes in food; they could make use of the new technology in glasshouse construction if it suited them but it was not vital to success. If the worst came to the worst they could move to where land was still available, for their produce was always in demand. The market gardener was not reliant on one means of sale, being able to retail directly from his garden, sell the produce to a costermonger or send it to one of the central markets. The nurserymen’s customers were not restricted to a single group. They ranged from aristocrats in country houses to the enthusiastic and expert gardeners who were members of the local horticultural societies and to the new householders represented by the fictional Mr. Pooter with their little gardens who wanted plants to put in them.

Paul Johnson writes ‘[m]etropolitan manufacturing has been characterised by flexible specialisation at least since the mid-nineteenth century.’³⁵⁵ Donna Loftus suggests that

³⁵³ Brodie, *The Politics of the Poor*, p. 7. Brodie was of course referring to a later period in his book.

³⁵⁴ Kean and Wheeler ‘Making History in Bethnal Green’, pp. 217-230.

³⁵⁵ Paul Johnson, ‘Economic Development and Industrial Dynamism in Victorian London’, *The London Journal*, 21 (1996), p. 33.

[t]he competitive advantage in small businesses was perceived in terms of flexibility and market knowledge which resulted from a close contact with customers and direct communication with workers. This was an economy in which supply and demand, production and consumption were in constant dialogue – exchanging information and adapting processes accordingly.³⁵⁶

The majority of businesses in the horticultural sector were small. Neither market gardening nor nursery gardening was a manufacturing industry, but many of the points raised by Johnson, Loftus and others relating to manufacturing apply equally well to commercial horticulture. Both branches were definitely characterised by flexible specialisation, the nurserymen particularly so. Fraser's Nursery introduced examples of panel bedding to keep up with horticultural fashion. Mr. Chitty laid out small gardens as well as running his nursery. Adam Forsyth reduced his nursery stock and opened a flower shop in the West End. Johnson also suggests that small-scale production is not necessarily inefficient, though 'not all London manufacturing was small-scale and sub-divided.' He points out how there was 'a pronounced geographical concentration of the manufacturing trades of London'³⁵⁷ and suggests this facilitates the exchange of information. There was certainly such a concentration of nurseries in Stoke Newington and market gardens in Hackney and Bromley. As has been shown, both large and small enterprises in both horticultural sectors could be profitable. Hugh Low had a 'plant manufactory' with no retail sales, where visitors might be perceived as a nuisance, Joseph Courcha ran a neighbour-hood based nursery, as did Mr. Batten. Both these men, like others, kept in 'close contact' with potential customers by patronising local horticultural societies and shows. John Greig, market gardener and florist, made his living from eight acres, whereas Farmer Ratford was a large proprietor with several plots of land in different parts of the East End.

³⁵⁶ Donna Loftus, 'Dynamism or Decline? Investigating Work in Late-Nineteenth Century London', (*History Workshop Journal*, forthcoming). I am grateful to Dr. Loftus for allowing me to cite this.

³⁵⁷ Johnson, 'Economic Development and Industrial Dynamism in Victorian London', p. 34.

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, there is no attempt to claim that horticulture played a major part in the economy of the East End of London. A preliminary online study of the Census from 1841 to 1891 for the various districts of the Tower Hamlets, using the search terms ‘gardener’, ‘market gardener’, ‘nurseryman’ and ‘florist’, has revealed that in 1841 there were at least 644 men who were enumerated as having these occupations. In 1851, 606 men were found. Even as late as 1891, 423 men were employed in horticulture. In all cases it is of course impossible to know how many of the ‘labourers’ also worked in the nurseries and market gardens.³⁵⁸ These numbers suggest that the industry was not so negligible as to deserve the total disregard that both economic and social historians have so far paid to it.

³⁵⁸ The censuses were accessed at various times during February and March 2011, using the websites Ancestry.co.uk (www.ancestry.co.uk) and The Genealogist.co.uk (www.genealogist.co.uk). Care was taken in all cases to check with the original page where the transcriptions offered seemed suspicious.

Introduction to Part II

The two chapters that made up Part I of this thesis have demonstrated that there was a strong community of both amateur and professional gardeners in the East End in the nineteenth century and that they were heirs to a long tradition of horticulture in that part of London. Some of their gardens and nurseries survived until almost the end of the century. But until the 1840s, there were no managed areas in which horticulture could be enjoyed in a public display. The three chapters of Part II will consider the various open spaces of the East End, from Victoria Park, the largest landscaped open space in the East End, to the three main cemeteries and to the smaller garden squares and disused burial grounds which the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association took over and landscaped.

There is a strong link between the private gardens and the larger public open spaces of the East End. All these spaces had horticultural ambitions in addition to their other functions. Horticulture was a very important aspect of Victoria Park. The park not only offered a pleasant place to walk, but, by careful labelling of the plants, sought to offer horticultural instruction, and, perhaps, a model for local gardeners to emulate on a smaller scale in their own gardens. In the squares and other smaller recreation grounds trees and shrubs and flowers were placed to make them pleasant places in which young and old could play or rest. All the cemeteries promised attractive landscaped surroundings in which the graves would be situated. Here some of the visitors did play a small part as gardeners themselves, for many tended the burial plots where their loved ones lay and planted flowers on them.

As part II explores, sometimes the multiple purposes of these spaces could lead to conflict. The gardeners of the East End, men and women, amateurs and professional, were actively engaged in their gardens, however small. Even a window box could be used creatively for horticulture. The spaces which they cultivated were often their own, private

domains though through horticultural societies, shows and competitions links were established with others. Any tensions or conflicts were easily contained. The park, cemeteries and squares were public, shared spaces, provided by others, in which local gardeners, apart from those professionally employed there, were mostly spectators only. Here there was more potential for tensions and disagreements – aesthetic considerations often ran up against questions of economy in the government departments responsible for Victoria Park, local communities worried about the establishment of a cemetery near their homes, and local vestries had to weigh up the cost versus benefit to the community when considering using the rates for the maintenance of a new small garden space landscaped by the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association. There were also tensions over the use of space: local people often made use of spaces in ways that reformers did not always expect. Nevertheless, open conflict was rare.

The succeeding chapters will consider the various open spaces of the East End. It will explore these spaces and the tensions that emerged in their creation and regulation. It will in addition consider ways that the history of these spaces challenges representations of the East End as mired in poverty and steeped in conflict.

Chapter Three:
Victoria Park

PICTURE DELETED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS

Victoria Fountain, Victoria Park, 1862.

Collage No. 19718, London Metropolitan Archives

Introduction

Victoria Park not only aimed at pleasing the keen gardeners of the area, but acted as a focus for outdoor leisure for the whole population. This chapter will examine some of the factors that lay behind its formation in the early 1840s and will discuss its importance as a site of horticultural excellence and its role in the increasing middle class desire to provide suitably wholesome recreation for the working classes. It will also touch upon some of the multiple meanings that Patrick Joyce proposed in relation to parks

the park can be understood as complementing and subverting, and enchanting and challenging, the city in the midst of which it was placed. It did this because it was the ultimate 'other' space in the city, the green, earthy, rural and natural heart of the built, crowded and man-made city.³⁵⁹

There has to date been only one small book wholly devoted to the story of Victoria Park, written in 1976 by a local historian and resident of Stepney, Charles Poulsen. His account traces the park from its beginnings to the 1970s, but has only a brief section on the horticulture of the park, although this was of great importance both to the park's creators and to the local population.³⁶⁰ In 1983 Stephen Rettig wrote a comparatively short dissertation for the MSc in the History of Modern Architecture on the first ten years of Victoria Park and was therefore not able to go into much detail.³⁶¹ In 1996, Joan M. Eeles wrote an MA Dissertation on parks and open spaces in nineteenth century London. She paid much attention to the parliamentary debates that lay behind the creation of parks for the capital, dealing with Finsbury Park and Battersea Park as well as Victoria Park. Her information on Victoria Park itself seems to come entirely from Poulsen's book. Much of the rest of the dissertation deals with the preservation of the various commons, touching briefly on the work of the open space societies, and with the beginnings of the Garden City

³⁵⁹ Patrick Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom*, p. 223.

³⁶⁰ Poulsen, *Victoria Park: A Study in the History of East London*.

³⁶¹ Stephen Rettig, 'The Evolution of Victoria Park 1841-1851' (unpublished MSc dissertation, Bartlett School of Architecture and Planning, University College London, 1983).

movement.³⁶² The park is of course mentioned in Hazel Conway's important 1991 survey of public parks, but she covers the entire country and Victoria Park is one among many.³⁶³ Harriet Jordan adapted her dissertation for the Architectural Association Graduate Diploma into a paper for *Garden History* in 1994. She deliberately covered a period on which Conway did not concentrate and, like most writers on parks, the majority of those she surveyed are in the north of England. She did, however, recognise that even at the end of the nineteenth century '[d]espite the increase in sports facilities, parks remained essentially horticultural institutions, with the prize features still being the works of the gardener.'³⁶⁴ A year later, Hilary A. Taylor wrote a paper also for *Garden History*, 'Urban Public Parks, 1840-1900: Design and Meaning'. As well as the utilitarian functions of parks, Taylor finds a relation between their design and the current style of Victorian landscape painting, in which nature is shown as 'civilized, - suburbanized, even... This was a nature which operated as a metaphor for an ideal and rational society.'³⁶⁵ She stresses how the Victorian belief in education also influenced layouts, and other art movements influenced the buildings that were introduced into parks. As she writes 'the best Victorian parks... were intended to instruct and delight.'³⁶⁶ Once again, all the examples she gives of parks and their designers are in the north or the midlands. More recently there have been photographic celebrations of parks – for example *London's Parks and Gardens* in 2003³⁶⁷ – and studies of individual parks – for example *An Oasis of Delight: The History of the Birmingham Botanical Gardens* in 2003³⁶⁸ – but Hazel Conway's remains the only major study of the subject in general.

³⁶² Joan M. Eeles, 'The Provision of Parks and Preservation of Open Spaces for Nineteenth Century London' (unpublished MA thesis, University of Exeter, 1996).

³⁶³ Conway, *People's Parks*.

³⁶⁴ Harriet Jordan, 'Public Parks: 1885-1914', *Garden History*, 22 (1994), p. 86.

³⁶⁵ Hilary A. Taylor, 'Urban Public Parks, 1840-1900: Design and Meaning', *Garden History*, 23 (1995), p. 204.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

³⁶⁷ Jill Billington and Sandra Lousada, *London's Parks and Gardens* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2003).

³⁶⁸ Phillada Ballard, *An Oasis of Delight: The History of the Birmingham Botanic Gardens* (Studley: Brewin, 2003).

This thesis will focus on the most important early Victorian London park – Victoria Park. As has been stated, there were plenty of open spaces in the East End of London in the nineteenth century. There were the market gardens and nurseries, large cemeteries, churchyards and a few small garden squares. There were Stepney Green and Bethnal Green and Bow Common. On the outer fringes there were Hackney Wick and Hackney Marshes and the Isle of Dogs. However, until the last quarter of the century, most of them were not open to the public, and those that were were not primarily designed for recreation. By 1833, there were few maintained public open spaces where people could walk and children could play safely, and which were large enough for organised sports. Victoria Park was the nation's first attempt to provide a state-financed open space, attractively landscaped and protected, in an area which was largely inhabited by the poor.³⁶⁹ It was not until 1869 that the Metropolitan Board of Works moved to acquire land for a park on the south side of the Thames, in Rotherhithe, to serve an equally poor but less numerous population.³⁷⁰

Once the political decision had been taken to create an East End park, money was found by the sale of a Crown property, York House. A bill to legalise the sale and use the funds for the new park was presented in May 1841³⁷¹ and was passed without debate. The park would have the status of a Royal park until it was handed over to the control of the Metropolitan Board of Works in 1887.

³⁶⁹ Hazel Conway states that a few parks had been created earlier – in Preston in 1833, in Derby in 1840, for example – but the first of these was a municipal enterprise and the second a private, charitable gift. Neither was funded by the State. The parks that followed, especially in the northern industrial towns, were predominantly municipal. Hazel Conway, *Public Parks* (Princes Risborough: Shire Publications, 1996), p. 9.

³⁷⁰ In 1831, the district of Southwark, which includes Rotherhithe, had a population of 178,643 and Lambeth, the next door riverside district, had 87,856 (a total of 266,299); in 1891, Southwark had risen to 338,993 and Lambeth to 275,202 (a total of 614,195). *London Statistics vol.2, 1891-1892*, London Ratings, p. 7. South of the river was far less built up than the north, even by the end of the century.

³⁷¹ A Bill To Enable the Commissioners of Woods to Complete the Contract for the Sale of York House and to Purchase Lands for a Royal Park, *Parliamentary Papers* 1841 vol. iii.314.

From the beginning the motivations for creating the park were mixed. The main motivation sprang from a growing realisation that something had to be done to improve the physical health of the population. At the same time there was the desire to improve the moral health of the working classes.³⁷² Although very few had been enfranchised by the 1832 Reform Act, it was realised that further reforms were likely to increase the numbers of working class voters and that attention should be paid to preparing them for the responsibilities of exercising their vote in the public sphere alongside 'their betters'. As Hazel Conway suggests, the 'concern for the welfare of the poorest members of urban society was motivated less by social ideals and more by fears of revolution, threats to security and the preservation of property rights.'³⁷³ And, as H.L Malchow points out, parks and other open spaces 'were more easily policed than the warren-like back courts and dark alleys of the impacted slum.'³⁷⁴ For some, there was also the desire to bring a spiritual dimension to bear, for contemplation of the beauties of nature would remind people of the glories of God's creation. As the Reverend Samuel Hadden Parkes, who founded the 'Window Gardens for the People' movement, wrote 'flowers speak of God and for God where God is too often entirely forgotten.'³⁷⁵ More than twenty years later, a writer in *Amateur Gardening* was still making the same claim

Flowers are a simple yet effectual means of raising the social and moral condition of our benighted brethren, for there they behold the work of the Creator, and are thereby led to yearn for higher things.³⁷⁶

As stated, the motivation for the creation of the park had always been mixed - as well as the need to improve the health of the population spiritual, aesthetic and political considerations were involved - it was soon the aspect of health that was given priority. In January 1832 the first cases of cholera were discovered in London. It was immediately

³⁷² Frank Mort discusses how sexual morality became an issue to be tackled together with an attempt to deal with the prevalence of diseases such as cholera among the poor. Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, pp. 13-61.

³⁷³ Conway, *Public Parks*, p. 5.

³⁷⁴ Malchow, 'Public Gardens and Social Action', p. 99.

³⁷⁵ Hadden Parkes, *Flower Shows of Window Plants*, p. 3.

³⁷⁶ *Amateur Gardening*, 28 June 1884, p. 106.

clear that the districts most at risk were the overcrowded slums. Mortality rates were highest south of the river, but there were also worrying outbreaks in the East End. As early as March 1832, a letter in the medical journal *The Lancet* showed that the link between poverty and disease had been made: ‘Give food to the hungry, clothe the naked, remove the filth from the habitations of the poor, and the cholera will quickly disappear.’³⁷⁷ Although the exact mechanism of transmission was not yet known, those in the West End were fearful that the disease would spread from the poor and overcrowded neighbourhoods to their own comfortable homes. The prevailing theory until at least the 1880s was that ‘diseases arose spontaneously from the miasma, or effluvia, or noxious gases emanated by accumulated organic matter’³⁷⁸ and as well as attempting to improve the disposal of sewage the best way to prevent this airborne contagion was to ensure that there was pure air that would disperse the miasma. There was a growing interest in public health and a growing belief that the Government should ensure that measures were taken to improve it. A temporary Board of Health was set up, which recommended that local boards, including substantial householders and at least one medical man, should instruct inspectors to report on the condition of the poor in their area. However, once the initial panic was over, little was actually done. Nevertheless, a precedent of government intervention had been established. The existence of typhoid and typhus fevers (at the time, the difference between the two was not known) made a less dramatic impact, but they were even more dangerous than cholera. Tuberculosis was the greatest killer of all, and it was known that lack of ventilation helped in its spread. All these factors added to the pressure for ‘something to be done’ to remove the cause – above all, to cleanse the streets and squalid houses of the slums and increase the amount of ‘fresh air’ available to the poor inhabitants.

³⁷⁷ Quoted in Anthony S. Wohl, *Endangered Lives, Public Health in Victorian Britain* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 45.

³⁷⁸ Wohl, *Endangered Lives*, p. 87.

In 1833, the Government set up a Select Committee to ‘consider the best means of securing Open Spaces in the Vicinity of populous Towns, as PUBLIC WALKS and PLACES OF EXERCISE calculated to promote the Health and Comfort of the Inhabitants’.³⁷⁹ The Committee’s report explicitly stated that the main people who should benefit should be the ‘middle or humbler classes.’³⁸⁰ It pointed out that ‘[d]uring the last fifty years, from the increase in building and the augmented value of Property, many open spaces have been inclosed, and every day the increasing multitude become more and more restricted in their means of reaching any open and healthy place to walk in.’³⁸¹ The Report was not concerned only with the situation around London, but an investigation of the conditions in the metropolis took up a large part of it. As regards the East End, the Report noted that

[L]eaving the Regent’s Park towards the East, Your Committee regret to state that for several miles along the Northern edge of the Metropolis, all the way to the River at Limehouse, there is not a single place reserved as a Park or Public Walk, planted and laid out for the accommodation of the People; yet there is no part of London where such Improvements are more imperatively called for.³⁸²

The members of the Select Committee were particularly keen that such public walks should include spaces where the younger members of the humbler class could exercise.

The Report spelt this out in greater detail:

Your Committee feel convinced that some Open Places reserved for the amusement (under due regulations to preserve order) of the humbler classes, would assist to wean them from low and debasing pleasures. Great complaint is made of drinking-houses, dog fights and boxing matches, yet unless some opportunity for other recreation is afforded to workmen, they are driven to such pursuits. The spring to industry which occasional relaxation gives, seems quite as necessary to the poor as to the rich.³⁸³

Clearly there is a recognition that there is an obligation on those who wish to change the habits of the poor to provide an alternative. However, as Peter Bailey puts it, ‘mere rest

³⁷⁹ Report from the Select Committee on Public Walks, *Parliamentary Papers* 1833, vol. xv.448.

³⁸⁰ Report, Public Walks 1833, p. 3.

³⁸¹ Report, Public Walks 1833, p. 5.

³⁸² Report, Public Walks 1833, p. 6.

³⁸³ Report, Public Walks 1833, p. 8.

was not recreation', going on to quote G.J. Romanes, who expressed the concept at its most harsh

[r]ecreation is, or ought to be, not a pastime entered upon for the sake of pleasure which it affords, but an act of duty undertaken for the sake of the subsequent power which it generates, and the subsequent profit which it ensures.³⁸⁴

The Report also suggested the provision of public bathing-places where there were rivers or canals available. It stressed the health-giving properties of a walk in the fresh air for those who passed so many long days at work in factories and their leisure time in crowded courts and alleys. It pointed out the good example given to the poor by members of different classes coming together in a public space, an idea that was taken up by the supporters of Victoria Park. The Committee hoped that voluntary donations would be forthcoming to finance these public walks, but it nevertheless stated 'When no Subscription or Donation can be raised, it seems the duty of the Government to assist in providing for the Health of the People by whose efforts they are supported.'³⁸⁵

To help them reach their conclusions as regarded the provisions for London, the Committee called in eight witnesses with local expertise, one of whom was particularly knowledgeable about Hampstead Heath and Primrose Hill, having been a surveyor there for forty years, three more who knew the East End well, and four who were questioned about Lambeth and Southwark. One of the witnesses called from the East End was Robert Sibley, who had been county surveyor for Middlesex for fifteen years. He was asked about the various sites that had been suggested for a public walk and about the considerable increase in housebuilding in the area. He agreed that there had been a large growth in population and that this had resulted in much formerly open land being built over. After discussing questions of land ownership affecting the various proposals, he recommended Bonner's Hall Fields as a suitable site for a public walk in the East End and said that there were several hundred acres of low value land available there that could be acquired at a

³⁸⁴ Quoted in Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England*, p. 67.

³⁸⁵ Report, Public Walks 1833, p. 10.

reasonable rate.³⁸⁶ A local magistrate, George Offer, who lived near the Tower, also recommended this site.³⁸⁷ A second local magistrate, John Stock, resident of Poplar, said he had known the area for fifty years.³⁸⁸ All three men regretted how open spaces where the poor had formerly been able to play games and walk had been closed to them because of the increase in building. They drew attention to the enclosure of Bow Common and Moorfields, which now excluded the poor.³⁸⁹ The only opportunity now available for playing games was 'in skittle-grounds or other spots connected with drinking houses and tea-gardens, where a great portion of the profit of the proprietor consists by charges on the liquor which they furnish.'³⁹⁰ This, it was argued, could lead to drunkenness and gambling.³⁹¹

In spite of the views expressed by the Committee, nothing was done, but the idea that there should be a park in the East End did not disappear. The Report of the Registrar General in 1839³⁹² suggested that such a park would do wonders for the health of the district, and again sought to arouse support by saying that diseases that originated in the East could easily spread West. The M.P. for Middlesex (of which Tower Hamlets formed part), Joseph Hume, also spoke in favour of a park. In March 1840 another Select Committee was set up to report on the Health of Towns,³⁹³ which again drew attention to the airless conditions of the worst courts and alleys of the East End.

There are several versions of the next steps that were taken in process of creating what would become Victoria Park. A report in *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper* in

³⁸⁶ Evidence of Robert Sibley, Report, Public Walks 1833, pp. 15-17.

³⁸⁷ Evidence of George Offer, *ibid.*, p. 20.

³⁸⁸ Evidence of John Stock, *ibid.*, p. 17.

³⁸⁹ Report, Public Walks 1833, pp. 15-21.

³⁹⁰ Statement of Examiner, *ibid.*, p. 22.

³⁹¹ It is ironic, therefore, that in an article on Victoria Park written in 1863, the *Daily News* states that 'upwards of fifty public-houses have sprung up within a radius of fifty yards all round the Park since it was first thrown open'. *Daily News*, 30 Nov 1863, p. 5.

³⁹² Annual Report of the Registrar-General of Births, Deaths, and Marriages in England, *Parliamentary Papers*, 1839 vol. xiv.187.

³⁹³ Report from the Select Committee on the Health of Towns, *Parliamentary Papers*, vol. xi.384.

1898³⁹⁴ says that early in 1840 Joseph Hume wrote to George Frederick Young, a shipowner who lived in Limehouse and who was at various times an M.P. for Tynemouth and Scarborough, pointing out that the Government had recently come into funds by the sale of York House and that now might be a good time to try to persuade it to acquire 'thirty acres of open space as a playground for the people of East London. 'Certainly,' was the reply of Mr. G.F. Young; 'but why not try to get three hundred acres?'³⁹⁵

In June 1840 Mr. Young held a meeting in his house of some of his influential friends as a result of which the decision was taken to hold a public meeting a few weeks later. There it was resolved to petition the Queen, and Mr. Young drew up the required document. His son, Frederick Young, became treasurer and honorary secretary of a provisional committee and was instrumental in getting it signed by thirty thousand of 'the respectable portion of the inhabitants of the Tower Hamlets'.³⁹⁶

The Home Secretary himself, the Marquis of Normanby, agreed to present the Petition to the Queen. The Queen gave her approval and, no doubt spurred on by the reports of 1839 and 1840, the Government decided that land should be acquired and a park established in the East End. This might have come as something of a surprise to the inhabitants of Tower Hamlets. A report in *The Examiner* in April 1841 states that Mr. J. Smith of Whitechapel reminded some of his fellow inhabitants that

he had the honour, last year, to bring before them a proposition to memorialise the government upon the subject of making a Royal park in the eastern part of London, and, although the matter was laughed at, from a doubt that the government would ever consider it, yet he had now the pleasure to tell them, that from the interviews the deputation from the provisional committee had had with Lord Duncannon, [one

³⁹⁴ This account was written while G.F. Young's son, by now Sir Frederick, was still alive and is fulsome in its praise of Sir Frederick. Another letter from Hume is quoted directly in the paper – it is likely that Sir Frederick supplied it. However, in Charles Poulsen's book on Victoria Park, he refers to a letter in the *Morning Advertiser* of 20 Jan 1872 from Mr. Stanley, M.P., as giving the 'most coherent account' of the formation of the Park. No mention is made by Poulsen of the contribution of Joseph Hume, or indeed of Sir Frederick Young. On checking in the *Morning Advertiser* of the date given, no letter from Mr. Stanley was found.

³⁹⁵ *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper*, 30 January 1898, p. 14. Although it is possible that Hume wrote to Young, in fact the decision to sell York House and use the funds to finance an East End Park was not taken until 1841 and the sum received was £72,000.

³⁹⁶ Report of James Pennethorne 1841, Victoria Park Papers MBW/OW/VP/001, London Metropolitan Archives, London.

of the Commissioners of Woods and Forests] they were satisfied that the plan would be carried out.³⁹⁷

By the early 1840s, as Henry Lawrence argues, ‘access to open space was increasingly thought to be the right of all town dwellers, not just of the privileged few, and to be a benefit to social and political stability by helping to defuse social tensions that were building to the breaking point.’³⁹⁸ In spring 1841, the Office of Woods and Forests set up a Board to oversee the enterprise and James Pennethorne, Architect to the Office, was instructed to find a suitable site.³⁹⁹ He suggested two possible areas, one to the south, which was basically Bow Common and some of its surrounds, and one to the north, which included Bonner’s Fields. Pennethorne reported on the northern site that about a third of the land was let out as market gardens, a third as grazing land and the rest as arable. There was also a brickfield and several almost worked-out gravel pits. Although the soil was of a reasonably good quality, the site was completely flat – not very promising for an attractive park.⁴⁰⁰ He much preferred the southern site. But the Office of Woods and Forests, perhaps influenced by the fact that witnesses before the Committee in 1833 had been in favour of the northern site, and no doubt also by the fact that the northern site was cheaper to acquire, decided to favour it whatever its perceived disadvantages. A further reason may have been that Bonner’s Fields were notorious as a gathering place for Radicals, who would no longer have an unsupervised meeting ground if the Fields were incorporated in a park. As stated, the money was found by the sale of Crown property and exactly eight years on from the Open Spaces Report, the creation of Victoria Park had begun. However it was not, as Neil MacMaster states, ‘in the very heart of the existing built up area’.⁴⁰¹ As maps of 1843 and 1862 (Items 2 and 3 in the folder) show, it was very much on the

³⁹⁷ *The Examiner*, 18 April 1841, p. 249.

³⁹⁸ Henry W. Lawrence, ‘The Greening of the Squares of London: Transformation of Urban Landscapes and Ideals’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 83 (1993), p. 111.

³⁹⁹ Report of James Pennethorne, April 1841, Victoria Park Papers, MBW/OW/VP/001

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰¹ Neil MacMaster, ‘The Battle for Mousehold Heath’, p. 120.

outskirts and, as James Pennethorne had pointed out, people would have to walk more than 2 miles to reach it from the most overcrowded parts.⁴⁰²

Although the area chosen was unprepossessing, it was largely unbuilt upon. In fact, as stated above, there was no need to *create* open space in the East End, it was more that what was already there should be acquired from private owners and made generally available and attractive as a place to visit in order to encourage the local people to come out to walk in it. Although much of the land for Victoria Park was acquired without difficulty from two large charities, St. Thomas's Hospital and the Sir John Cass Estate,⁴⁰³ negotiations to purchase the smaller portions, mostly occupied by the market gardeners discussed in the preceding chapter, were protracted, but work went ahead on planning and laying out the new park.

Laying Out the Park

All the large parks that then existed in London were in the West End and it was from these that ideas were drawn for the new park in the East. James Pennethorne, in addition to being the official Departmental Architect, brought a particularly relevant experience to bear: he had worked with John Nash on the creation of Regent's Park and its surroundings. The same approach was taken for Victoria Park – to create an area around the park where desirable villas could be built. The sale of these building plots would go some way to cover the cost of the park, the attractions of which would encourage rich City men to come and live in the area.⁴⁰⁴ With this in mind, a carriage drive was to be laid out around the whole of the park where the residents could promenade. But this plan was far too optimistic; the infrastructure of a major road to the City never happened and although there were some big houses in Hackney, not enough of the wealthy were prepared to take

⁴⁰² Report of James Pennethorne, April 1841.

⁴⁰³ Poulsen, *Victoria Park*, pp. 30-31

⁴⁰⁴ Conway, *People's Parks*, pp. 41-42.

the chance of moving to the unfashionable east. There was already a public road that crossed the park, dividing what was to become the more highly landscaped western section from the much larger eastern section, which was deliberately left as open grass where games could be played. There was at first no proposal for ornamental water; in fact James Pennethorne sketched in a huge circular flowerbed rather than the lake that he eventually decided upon.⁴⁰⁵

By October 1844, as the market gardeners whose land had been bought for the park moved out, it was realised that, as there had been some theft of produce left in their fields, someone was needed to maintain daily control of the land. James Pennethorne wrote to the Commissioners of Woods and Forests suggesting that one of the former market gardeners, John Greig, should be appointed as a temporary Superintendent.

Mr. Greig has resided many years in one of the Houses purchased from Mr. Thompson; he has been employed by Mr. Higgins and the Solicitors upon the Jury cases, and found able and zealous; he has been most strongly recommended to me as an upright honest man, a good gardener, and valuer of timber etc. – and I therefore presume to suggest that if the Board should deem it necessary forthwith to place some one in charge of the lands – Mr. Greig would be a proper person, until more permanent arrangements can be made.⁴⁰⁶

In November 1844 it was reported in *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper* that

upwards of 700 loads of rubbish have been brought from the works in progress in the formation of the new road at Whitechapel, to fill up the excavations and for other purposes. A circle has been staked out in the Grove-road, which is to form one of the principal entrances into the park, and some progress has already been made in the drainage of many of the fields.⁴⁰⁷

In January 1845 the same paper wrote

the operations for the formation of the new park have been generally commenced and are now in complete activity. The external boundaries of the fields and plantations required for the site have all been removed and levelled, the line of park palings has been laid out.⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁵ Victoria Park sketch map, LRRO 1/2036 National Archive, Kew.

⁴⁰⁶ Victoria Park Papers, MBW/OW/VP/002, London Metropolitan Archives, London.

⁴⁰⁷ *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper*, 10 Nov 1844, p. 9.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 5 Jan 1845 p. 7.

Now that real progress was being made, the Commissioners of Woods and Forests decided that it was time to appoint ‘a person of acknowledged experience and judgement in such matters’ to supervise the planting and laying out of the ground. Again, this was to be a temporary appointment – for a period not exceeding two years until ‘the Park should be completely planted and put in a state to be delivered over to the care of a permanent superintendent’. The man chosen was Samuel Curtis, then sixty-five, the Editor and Proprietor of *Curtis’s Botanical Magazine*, who also ran a prize-winning nursery and orchard in Coggeshall, Essex. Curtis had won the Medal of Honour of the Society of Arts in 1808 ‘for having planted the most extensive orchard in the Kingdom’, and in 1933 the Royal Horticultural Society wrote that the collection of trees in his ‘spectacular garden’ included ‘every kind of tree of note known to exist in the British Isles.’⁴⁰⁹ He had been warmly recommended to the Chief Commissioner by Sir William Hooker, the Director of the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew, as ‘a practical arboriculturalist’. By the beginning of November 1845, James Pennethorne had been over the ground with Mr. Curtis and negotiations were completed. John Greig would be dismissed and Mr. Curtis appointed at a salary of £250 per year, to work with Pennethorne ‘subject to the control of the Board.’⁴¹⁰

Faced with the problems posed by a virtually flat site, Pennethorne and Curtis approached the design in the same way that Capability Brown or Humphry Repton might have done when considering a country estate. Both of these great landscape designers believed in the creative use of trees. Repton, in 1806, had written that landscape gardening should ‘display the natural beauties, and hide the natural defects of every situation’ and that it should ‘give the appearance of extent and freedom, by carefully disguising or hiding the boundary.’⁴¹¹ John Claudius Loudon, the great horticulturalist, was a follower of Repton, and in 1840 he had laid out the Derby Arboretum which, though far smaller than

⁴⁰⁹ Samuel Curtis Garden Project, www.mnlg.com/curtis/samuel.html. Accessed 21 Sept 2010.

⁴¹⁰ Victoria Park Papers, MBW/OW/VP/002.

⁴¹¹ Quoted in Hadfield, *A History of British Gardening*, p. 245.

Victoria Park, faced some of the same difficulties, particularly the flat, unpromising site. As an arboretum, it was intended to display a wide variety of trees, and Loudon designed winding paths to draw walkers around the park and placed labels in front of each specimen. Both these ideas were used in Victoria Park where, although there was no overt desire to create an arboretum, there was still the need to provide shade and interest for visitors and in fact a wide variety of trees was chosen.⁴¹²

As William Hooker had realised in recommending Samuel Curtis for the position, at this early stage an ‘arboriculturalist’ was needed to make the best choices of the trees that would form the backbone of the park planting. Curtis was clearly determined that Victoria Park, though situated in the East End, should not fall below the standards expected of a major park. On 25th November 1845, he wrote to the Board with his suggestions for the varieties and numbers of trees and shrubs that should be bought, saying that no time should be lost ‘lest frost should cause hindrance in the planting.’ He said that he and James Pennethorne had estimated that there would be about 16 acres of tree plantation within the total area of 237 acres and that he would suggest two thousand trees per acre, at a cost of £20 per thousand. In addition there would be four hundred larger trees for the avenue and for dotting about which would cost 1s. each. He proposed elms and limes for the avenue and hornbeams for a boundary screen near the Regent’s Canal. He estimated the cost of the labour involved in ground preparation and planting at £340, ‘making the whole expence [sic] of the Trees, Planting, and preparing the Ground at £1192.’ He suggested that if any ‘curious specimen plants’ were wanted, it would be better to wait a year. He had been to view some five hundred trees in Kensington Gardens which would be available for planting in Victoria Park, but was worried that they were too large to transplant successfully. He attached a list of the trees he would propose purchasing, together with prices, from four different nurseries (none local to Victoria Park). As well as

⁴¹² Simo, *Loudon and the Landscape*, pp. 93-106.

deciduous and evergreen trees, he suggested ‘coarse shrubs, such as Lilac, Spirea, Ribes, Guelder Rose, Tamarisk, Rhus etc.’⁴¹³ (At this stage they were still laying out the ‘bones’ of the park, so it was too early to start thinking of flowers.) All these trees were just the sort of species that would have been thought appropriate for a nobleman’s park – lime or elm avenues could be found at almost every stately home in Britain. This would also no doubt appeal to the purchasers of the projected high quality houses around the perimeter. A report in the *Illustrated London News* in January 1846 stated that ‘In consequence of the very propitious state of the weather, the operations of digging and planting have been very actively resumed, and from seventy to eighty men have daily been employed in these occupations. Within the last month upwards of ten thousand trees and shrubs have been planted.’⁴¹⁴

Although the park was very far from finished (the *Gardeners’ Chronicle* described it as ‘hardly more than a quarter formed’⁴¹⁵), East Enders had already started to use it. The *Illustrated London News* reported in May 1846

we may state that on Good Friday, the new park was visited by 25,000 persons, and by a considerably greater number on Easter Monday...The regulations of St. James’s-park, with regard to the admission of visitors, are observed as far as possible, the park-keepers having orders to exclude all disorderly and drunken persons, itinerant vendors, and dogs. During the recent holidays, notwithstanding the crowds of visitors, excellent order was kept by an efficient staff of park keepers...and very trifling injury or damage was done.⁴¹⁶

It is clear that no concessions were being made to the behaviour expected in a park - indeed the ambition to improve behaviour was part of the motivation that lay behind the creation of Victoria Park in the first place - but against the expectations of some ‘West-Enders’ no unseemly incidents took place. The fears that the plants and trees would be vandalised were swiftly abated. The vicar of St. Philip’s, Bethnal Green, wrote to the *Times* in 1847

⁴¹³ Victoria Park Papers, MBW/OW/VP/002.

⁴¹⁴ *Illustrated London News*, 3 Jan 1846, p. 14.

⁴¹⁵ *Gardeners’ Chronicle*, 1 Aug 1846, p. 519.

⁴¹⁶ Quoted in Charles Poulsen, *Victoria Park*, p. 40.

There is, I believe, a very general opinion entertained, though I think it a very erroneous one, that the poorer classes in this country cannot be trusted, unless under the *surveillance* of the police, in any place of public amusement, from a wanton disposition to injure or destroy whatever is beautiful in nature or curious in art...Now when it knows that there have been planted in various parts of the park roses and other flowers of various kinds entirely unprotected, and that in only one solitary instance throughout the summer has a rose or flower of any kind been either plucked or injured, this fact alone is sufficient to refute the unjust aspersion that the poorer classes are not to be trusted in public places without the dread of the police before their eyes.⁴¹⁷

A similar suspicion would still be felt about working class visitors to the Great Exhibition of 1851 but, as Peter Gurney points out 'the good behaviour of the working class crowd on shilling days was...frequently remarked upon in the bourgeois press.'⁴¹⁸ The good behaviour of those visiting Victoria Park might be seen as all the more remarkable, as entry was free and the park was much nearer to a truly working class area. The shilling entrance fee to the Crystal Palace, quite apart from the trouble of getting to Hyde Park, would have restricted the visitors to the Great Exhibition to those at the upper level of the working classes.

In May 1846, James Pennethorne suggested that consideration should be given to converting some of the disused gravel pits into an ornamental lake in the western part of the park. Later the same year, his plans for a sheet of water with three islands were approved and work began. When the lake was completed by 1847, Curtis recommended embellishing it with water fowl and providing him with a little boat so that he could tend more easily to the trees and bushes which had been planted on the islands. A touch of fantasy was added by the purchase of the Chinese pagoda which had formed the entrance to the Chinese Collection at Hyde Park Corner. This was installed on one of the islands, and James Pennethorne designed a bridge in the Chinese style so that people could stroll

⁴¹⁷ *The Times*, 7 Sept 1847, p. 5.

⁴¹⁸ Peter Gurney, 'An appropriated space: the Great Exhibition, the Crystal Palace and the working class', in *The Great Exhibition of 1851: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. Louise Purbright (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 116.

across to enjoy it.⁴¹⁹ In 1850, when Curtis had been replaced by John Gibson, the lake borders and the islands were further beautified by willows bought when Loddiges' Nursery in Stoke Newington was sold up. Some of these willows or their descendants are still to be found in Victoria Park today.

It is clear from the example of the introduction of water fowl and the installation of the pagoda that once the project was under way the Commissioners of Woods and Forests were willing to sanction some purely decorative additions, just as later they would finance the building of a bandstand. It seems the Commissioners wanted the East End park to have all the features that would be expected in a park in a more wealthy area. In 1862, one of the local newspapers described Victoria Park as 'eclipsing anything of the kind to be found in the metropolis...its walks reminding one of the scenes in some fairy romance' and the cumulative beauties of its water, trees and lawns 'forming a region such as poets might sing of, artists paint, and novelists describe.'⁴²⁰ In 1863, the national *Daily News* felt able to write that 'Victoria Park may now take its place amongst the best of the London parks...The ornamental water is much more extensive than that of St. James's Park, and quite as beautiful.'⁴²¹ In 1898, Lieut.-Col. J.J. Sexby, in the course of his survey of all the municipal parks in London, said that '[t]hough Victoria Park has not acquired the prestige of either Hyde or Regent's Park, it is not inferior to either of them in natural beauty or brightness of floral decoration.'⁴²²

Most early contemporary opinion of the park was equally favourable, but there were two exceptions, which are worth considering because it shows how seriously the

⁴¹⁹ Victoria Park Papers, MBW/OW/VP/003.

⁴²⁰ *Bethnal Green Times*, 22 Mar 1862, p. 6.

⁴²¹ *Daily News*, 30 Nov 1863, p. 5.

⁴²² Lieut.-Col. J. J. Sexby, *The Municipal Parks, Gardens, and Open Spaces of London, Their History and Associations*, (London: Elliot Stock, 1898) p. 553. At this period, Sexby was the chief officer of the parks department for the London County Council, with responsibility for the laying out and management of all the parks, gardens, and open spaces maintained by the council. (Jordan, 'Public Parks, 1885-1914', p. 111).

⁴²² For a more detailed account of the 'floral decoration', see my article 'One of the Ablest Gardeners in the East End of London': William Prestoe and Victoria Park 1857-1868', *The London Gardener*, 10 (2004-5), 88-99.

project was taken in the horticultural community. The influential *Gardeners' Chronicle*, which had been positive in 1846, wrote two vitriolic reports, anonymous, as was usual, but in the position of the leading article, in 1850. It referred to 'unmeaning masses of little miserable trees and shrubs, evidently the sweepings of some neglected nursery ground...a frightful pagoda perched at one end of the frightful island.' It drew attention to the cost of creating the park - £44,000 in round figures – and closed

[w]e most earnestly hope that Government will never again intrust [sic] these important works to persons who are not only wholly destitute of good taste, and profoundly ignorant of the nature of trees, or the soils to which they are adapted, or of the effects which they may be made to produce, but are even unacquainted with the mode of selecting them in nurseries, and of putting them in the ground; who seem, in short, to understand nothing except the art of obtaining the worst possible result at the largest possible expense.⁴²³

And yet in 1846 the *Gardener's Chronicle* reporter had described how well the shrub borders had been dug, forming 'a capital soil for the plants, which, notwithstanding the very unfavourable season have all thriven well, scarcely a single death having occurred among them.'⁴²⁴ In 1847, a local clergyman wrote that 'of the manner in which the park has been laid out by the experienced gentleman (Mr. Curtis) to whom this part of the undertaking has been intrusted, it is impossible to speak too highly.'⁴²⁵ It is true that when Samuel Curtis was dismissed in the summer of 1848 there was some controversy over his accounts and evidence that he and James Pennethorne did not find it easy to work together, but there was no reference to any incompetence on his part. His obituary in the *Floral World* in 1860 says 'his unvarying kindness and urbanity of manner endeared him in a marked degree to most of its habitual frequenters, amongst whom his name is still regarded as a "household word"'.⁴²⁶

The second hostile critic was Edward Kemp, who had been trained by Joseph Paxton and was the Superintendent of Birkenhead Park which Paxton had designed. He

⁴²³ *Gardeners' Chronicle*, 9 Nov 1850, p. 707.

⁴²⁴ *Gardeners' Chronicle*, 1 Aug 1846, p. 519.

⁴²⁵ *The Times*, 7 Sept 1847, p. 5.

⁴²⁶ *Floral World*, 1860, p. 44.

visited Victoria Park in 1850 in the course of a trip to write a guide book to the parks and gardens of London. He was disappointed by what he saw. He thought ‘that everything about the execution of the work has been done in the worst possible manner.’ But he also thought that

[e]ven here, where everything has been done in a most imperfect manner, the trees in irregular plantations being placed in rows, the walks and roads made to follow every little irregularity of surface, and even to be more irregular than the ground itself, the ground, which was newly sown down with grass, not at all levelled, and the margin of a large sheet of water left with a steep gravelly bank from one to two or three yards in nearly perpendicular height, such is the softening and ameliorating influence of trees, that the mere plantations already begin to produce an air of comfort, and shelter, and variety.⁴²⁷

By 1850 the Superintendent was John Gibson, another protégé of Joseph Paxton.

Gibson had been with Paxton while the latter was designing the municipal park in Liverpool (though the work there was supervised by another of Paxton’s assistant gardeners from Chatsworth, Edward Milner). Kate Colquhoun, author of a biography of Paxton, suggests that Gibson altered and improved the layout of Victoria Park when he took it over, aged 34, immediately after Curtis left.⁴²⁸ This suggestion is born out by Kemp, who recognised that improvements would take time ‘but we are happy to observe that it has been begun in earnest by Mr. Gibson, who has now been appointed to the charge of the park two years.’⁴²⁹ This hostility could have been very damaging to the reputation of the new park, especially the allegation of the waste of public money, but the *Gardeners’ Chronicle* was alone in its opinion, for even Kemp found some things to praise.

In the plantations are a great variety of ornamental shrubs and low trees which, when prevented from smothering each other, as they do at present, and distributed more equally through the masses, will supply the elements of a good collection, and will some day render this park a very interesting one...Everything but the Coniferous tribe seems to succeed very well in this situation; and many of the trees, thorns, etc., have made an excellent growth, and are getting well established.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁷ Kemp, *The Parks, Gardens of London*, p. 17

⁴²⁸ Colquhoun, *A Thing In Disguise*, p. 115.

⁴²⁹ Kemp, *The Parks, Gardens of London*, p.17.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

A young American, who visited the park at much the same time and wrote an account which appeared in 1860, had quite a different reaction. He also recognised that the park was far from finished, but he thought that the western part of it was

laid out very gracefully. There are miniature lakes in it, full of swans and other aquatic birds. A beautiful island is formed by one of them, and upon it there is an elegant and fairy-like structure in the Chinese style of architecture, which is, in the proper season, almost buried among a profusion of flowers and shrubs and plants.⁴³¹

In order to keep order among the profusion and to keep up standards a great deal of meticulous maintenance work was necessary. On July 25th 1849, soon after he became Superintendent, John Gibson wrote a report to the Commissioners of Her Majesty's Woods and Forests. The gravelled drives were becoming full of grass and weeds – they should be cleaned, to prevent the problem from becoming even worse the following year. The fences should be improved as 'loose characters' were able to resort to the park day and night. He was worried that the sheep grazing in the rougher areas of the park – as they were to do well into the twentieth century – were damaging the young trees. He needed money to provide guards for them. His final paragraph suggests that there were now permanent gardening staff maintaining the appearance of the park,

I have now to ask your permission to get a set of Tools, as there is not half a dozen in the Park excepting borrowed ones. The kind of tools I allude to are Pecks, Mattocks, Hoes, Rakes, Gravel do, Shovels, Scrapers, Clipping and Pruning Shears, Billhooks, Axes, Saws, Knives, Scythes, Reel and Line, Grindstone etc., which would cost from £9 to £10 – and in addition a small stock of various sized nails for repairs.⁴³²

From the nature of the surviving sources it is difficult to discover much about the practical, day-to-day operations of the park such as this paragraph conveys. Most of the material preserved at the London Metropolitan Archives consists of correspondence addressed to the Office of Woods and Forests which very rarely touches on such mundane

⁴³¹ David Bartlett, *What I Saw in London* (New York: Saxton, Barker, 1860), p.39. Bartlett visited London twice, staying a year each time, 1847-48 and 1850-51. It is not stated on which visit he went to Victoria Park.

⁴³² Victoria Park Papers, MBW/OW/VP/003.

matters as the purchase of hoes and pruning shears, which would have given some idea of the running costs. There are references to signing on of park constables, but nothing about how many or what their wages were. There is no reference at all to the gardening staff or to what budget John Gibson might have had on which to run the park, though in 1859 the *East London Observer* stated that gardeners were paid 2s. 6d. per day and park keepers £1 per week.⁴³³ A little can be inferred from documents such as a schedule of August 1853 which shows occupants of land around the park awaiting building development. This includes cottages let to three park labourers and three park constables, as well as a larger cottage occupied by William Askew, who rents much of the park's open land for grazing as well as acting as the park's carter. These cottages are directly under the ownership of the Office of Woods and Forests, and there must have been many more park employees living in their own accommodation elsewhere.⁴³⁴ The schedule also mentions a plantation of small trees that will later be set out in the park, grass land and potato ground. It explains that 'the small pieces of potato ground is [sic] cultivated by the Workmen living in the cottages.'⁴³⁵ In 1856 the decision to withdraw this potato ground and let William Askew use it as grazing provoked a memorial to the Office of Woods and Forests by eighteen men who cultivated the land – all keepers, labourers and constables of the park – pleading to be allowed to stay there. At least one of the men had been given permission to use the land by Samuel Curtis, fourteen years earlier.

We have hitherto grown Potatoes and other Vegetables very useful for the maintenance of our families and its cultivation has been of great benefit to all of us withdrawing many from Public houses and inducing generally habits of sobriety and providence.⁴³⁶

The words of the memorial were no doubt carefully calculated to appeal to superiors familiar with the arguments in favour of gardening for the working classes. It is the only

⁴³³ *East London Observer*, 25 June 1859, p. 3.

⁴³⁴ In the *Gardener's Magazine* of 1 Aug 1863, p. 259 it is stated that at that date there were 32 gardeners assisting the Head Gardener of Victoria Park.

⁴³⁵ Victoria Park Papers, MBW/OW/VP/004.

⁴³⁶ Victoria Park Papers, MBW/OW/VP/004.

reference to any kind of allotment gardening in the area so far discovered in this early period.

There are a few hints as to the costs of running the park which are given in various Reports of the Commissioners which are quoted in the hostile *Gardeners' Chronicle* article referred to above under the heading 'Works of Formation' as opposed to 'Purchase of site etc.' and are 'Up to 1847, £30,521; in 1848, £10,034 13s.; in 1849, £3,194 3s 5d; in 1850, £319 1s.'⁴³⁷ This must cover all the heavy work at the beginning when the roads and drives were created, the fencing erected and the major purchases of trees and shrubs were made. However, the Report which covers the period 1st April 1849 to 31st March 1850, which was printed in July 1850, is the first to give a detailed breakdown of expenditure on the various Royal Parks and it gives the total for Victoria Park as £2,096 1s 6d. Even if three items that are not directly related to maintenance are excluded, the total still comes to £1,361.⁴³⁸ It is only by deducting the wages of the Superintendent, Gatekeepers, Foremen, Labourers etc. and the cost of Liveries, that the figure approaches that given in the *Gardeners' Chronicle*, i.e. £365 7s 3d. The park actually made money by selling gravel - £157 19s 0d – renting grassland - £308 – and 'miscellaneous receipts' - £12 14s 6d. Over the same period, St. James's Park, Green Park and Hyde Park, which are grouped in the accounts, received £13,469 4s 4d; Kensington Gardens received £1,678 13s. 11d; Regent's Park received £6,516 4s 3d. Thus Victoria Park seems to have received less than most of the other Royal Parks. Writing in 1863, George Glenny commented

[t]here was no particular reason why we should praise the management of the West-end parks and gardens, because there was a prodigal expenditure of money and labour, and it would be strange if there was not something of a result. But at Victoria Park the gardener did wonders almost without means, and taught a lesson of economy and management to every practical man who visited his greenhouses and pits.⁴³⁹

⁴³⁷ *Gardeners' Chronicle*, 9 Nov 1850, p. 707.

⁴³⁸ 'Twenty-seventh Report of the Commissioners of Her Majesty's Woods, Forests, Land Revenues, Works and Buildings', July 1850 *Parliamentary Papers*, vol. xxx.554.

⁴³⁹ *Gardener's Magazine*, 7 Nov 1863, p. 354.

John Gibson must have had reasonable sums per year to continue the work through the 1850s. The park was still in formation, and there would have been further purchases of stock, as well as the necessary maintenance of fences, paths and seats. In early 1856 a local resident wrote to the *Gardeners' Chronicle* about Victoria Park: 'The collection of trees and shrubs here is large and varied...of *Crataegus* there are upwards of 50 species or varieties; and in *Pyrus*, *Cerasus* and other ornamental trees the collection is equally rich, and additions are continually being made of such as are likely to thrive.'⁴⁴⁰ The park became famous for its collection of willows. There was no slackening of the ambition to make Victoria Park a centre of horticultural excellence.

John Gibson left at some time in early 1858, and was succeeded as Superintendent by George Merrett. Just before Gibson left, in November 1857, a new head gardener was appointed, William Prestoe, then aged 24. This is the first time that the name of a head gardener emerges – and it is not to be found in the Victoria Park Papers but in the pages of the gardening magazines, particularly the *Gardener's Magazine*, edited by Shirley Hibberd. It seems, however, that his appointment had been approved at the highest level, for he later told the East Tower Hamlets Floricultural Society that when he had been given the position, the then Chief Commissioner of Public Works, Sir Benjamin Hall, 'had expressed a wish that he would assist and encourage the floricultural societies of the district.'⁴⁴¹ Nevertheless, there is no mention anywhere in the surviving official literature of the appointment or of his conditions of work and his salary. It is only from an account published after his death in 1868 that one learns that for most of the time he earned 24s a week and never more than 30s.⁴⁴² Before his appointment, William Prestoe had spent three years at Kew, where, according to the *Daily News*, he had 'learnt the art of

⁴⁴⁰ *Gardeners' Chronicle*, 2 Feb 1856, p. 70.

⁴⁴¹ *Gardener's Magazine*, 31 Dec 1864, p. 418.

⁴⁴² *Gardener's Magazine*, 12 Dec 1868, p. 527.

embroidering nature's carpet in gorgeous masses of colour.'⁴⁴³ According to Brent Elliott Kew and other botanic gardens, 'found bedding a useful way of displaying a portion of the plant kingdom, and were devoting more attention to massing during the course of the 1850s.'⁴⁴⁴ Bedding became extremely popular in the greatest of Victorian private gardens, where displays would be changed several times a year. The fashion was taken up in other public parks, notably the grounds of the Crystal Palace when it was moved to Sydenham, and in Hyde Park, where in 1859, according to Samuel Broome, 'no fewer than from 30,000 to 40,000 bedding plants' had been set out, so that now 'the working classes could see a display of summer flowers without going to Kew.'⁴⁴⁵ With the coming of William Prestoe, the working classes of the East End would not have had to go even as far as Hyde Park, for as the *Daily News* pointed out, it was he who introduced the 'flower beds among grass' to Victoria Park and concentrated on

offering to the working man such flowers as he could most easily cultivate in his own little garden...fuchsias, dahlias, geraniums, asters, verbenas...It is to these flower-beds that the working man is attracted as if by some magic spell, and from their contemplation he learns how best to cultivate those little home gardens which, where possible, form the delight of his leisure hours.⁴⁴⁶

Thirty-five years later, Lieut.-Col. Sexby made the same point

at Victoria Park the hard-working artisan is a bit of a horticultural critic in his way. Somehow, in the small back-gardens and crowded yards he manages to rear many a choice specimen, so that the flowers in the adjoining park have to be kept up to the mark.⁴⁴⁷

The flowers and trees in the park were meant to give pleasure, but they were also intended to be useful in increasing knowledge of the natural world and in giving inspiration to local gardeners, as these writers pointed out. There were identifying labels, so that those who were keen enough could buy the same varieties for themselves. The references to working men's gardens and Sir Benjamin's injunction to William Prestoe to encourage

⁴⁴³ *The Daily News*, 30 Nov, 1863, p. 5.

⁴⁴⁴ Elliott, *Victorian Gardens*, p. 134.

⁴⁴⁵ Quoted in Elliott, *Victorian Gardens*, pp. 134-135.

⁴⁴⁶ *Daily News*, 30 Nov 1863, p. 5.

⁴⁴⁷ Sexby, *The Municipal Parks, Gardens, and Open Spaces of London*, p. 553.

local floricultural societies, reinforce the argument put forward in this thesis that even at the time there was an awareness that there was a genuine interest in horticulture in the East End, despite the modest incomes of many of the inhabitants.

Shirley Hibberd lived in Stoke Newington, not far from Victoria Park, and he must have found it very easy to visit it regularly. He took over the editorship of the *Gardener's Magazine* in 1862 and from then on throughout the 1860s there were long reports on the annual summer bedding schemes in the park. The magazine included plans of the main beds with the names of all the plants used. In the days before cheap photographic printing, it was not possible to include photographs of the beds. For those who lived within reach of the park the best thing was to go and look at the planting schemes *in situ*. And, just as Prestoe is unrecognised in Whitehall, so Park Superintendent Merrett is unmentioned in Hibberd's magazine. His readers were mainly to be found among the middle and working class gardeners, who tended to cultivate their own plots rather than relying on the efforts of others. They wanted to know about schemes that they could adapt for their own use and Shirley Hibberd, who certainly did much of the work in his own garden and was a great experimenter, knew how to please them.

From Shirley Hibberd's reports it is possible to learn what plants would have been cultivated in Victoria Park and how the beds would have been laid out.⁴⁴⁸ These immensely detailed accounts of the bedding schemes, written for a national readership, are indicative of an interest at the time in the possibilities of 'bedding out'. They are equally important today in providing a valuable source of information that illustrates popular taste in nineteenth century park gardening. The plant material used was such that the designs could be copied on a small scale by any villa gardener, but the principles are just the same as those that governed the layout of many of the most important Victorian gardens. This aspect of the park was very much under the control of the head gardener rather than the

⁴⁴⁸ For a more detailed account, see my article in *The London Gardener* vol. 10, 2005, pp. 88-99.

Superintendent and it is therefore not really surprising that it was William Prestoe who was praised by Hibberd. The complicated schemes were very much the same as those that would have shown off the skills of a nobleman's gardener at a stately home and yet Prestoe had to achieve his results with none of the resources that would have been available there. Indeed, Shirley Hibberd writes 'Mr. Prestoe...accomplishes wonderful things with conveniences that are positively contemptible.' He had

one span-roofed house abut forty feet by twelve, and a frame ground of about a thousand square feet, the frames made of rough timbers by the gardeners themselves, and lights sufficient to cover only about half of them...Of course in such a place as this propagating goes on all the year round. The little house is now filled with cuttings [of geraniums], mostly three or four cuttings in fifty-four sized pots, in which they are to be wintered, and be shifted into separate pots in spring. In the pits are reserves of asters, perillas, etc. In the rear of one of the shrubberies, and quite out of sight of the public, is a small piece of nursery ground. Here we saw a fine stock of...calceolaria, turned out expressly to furnish cuttings for beds next year...We cannot speak too highly of the spirit and ability shown in the management of these grounds.⁴⁴⁹

It is clear that most of the bedding plants were grown in the park, not bought in from nurseries. Some of the geranium stocks were four and five years old – Mr. Prestoe and his men, of whom he had thirty-two, were masters of cuttings.⁴⁵⁰ As Shirley Hibberd points out, visitors to a park expect that the beds should 'differ from year to year; people expect a change and perhaps have some right to it; yet it is pretty certain that there is not such an infinite choice of subjects suitable for such work' and he goes on to say 'the Government does not lavish money in profusion on the place, and much of what is done is done under difficulty, and such difficulty as makes the result truly surprising.'⁴⁵¹

William Prestoe died suddenly in 1868 and was succeeded by Mr. Bullen, who had been head gardener in Kensington Gardens for nineteen years. It is interesting to see that Mr. Bullen was willing to leave the fashionable West End to take over at Victoria Park. He continued the style of planting that was now well established. Park gardening, in this

⁴⁴⁹ *Gardener's Magazine*, 1 Sept 1862, pp. 273-274.

⁴⁵⁰ *Gardener's Magazine*, 1 Aug 1863, p. 259.

⁴⁵¹ *Gardener's Magazine*, 12 Aug 1865, pp. 156-157.

High Victorian period, was particularly elaborate, with its intricate ribbon borders and complicated, colourful designs. It required a great deal of maintenance and, although the lawn mower was in existence at this period, (and the *Daily News* noted in 1863 that the sixteen cricket pitches are regularly mowed ‘by machine’ every week or ten days⁴⁵²), there would have been few other mechanical tools to help. Watering was always a problem, and sometimes the grass and trees suffered in a hot summer. But in 1876 an address was sent to the Metropolitan Board of Works which was full of praise

We have...watched with the most anxious care the marvellous progress of the improvements during the last three years which is apparent in the magnificent display and management of flowers; in the neat and regular order in which the shrubberies are kept; in the care and taste displayed in preserving its waters from impurities; also upon the general management, which reflects the highest credit on those whose duty it is to superintend so extensive a public park.⁴⁵³

In 1877, Nathan Cole commented that

pure air, green grass, trees, shrubs, and bright flowers are nowhere more prized than at the East End. Bethnal Green, Hackney, Bow and Whitechapel are proud of their park, and justly so, for they have...a magnificent display of flowers that is equal to anything seen in and about London...This park...maintains the first position for flowers in spring, summer and autumn. The spring commences with Hyacinths, Tulips, and other spring flowers of various and delicate colours filling the atmosphere with fragrance. Then comes the summer glow with a diversity of colours contrasted and harmonised...and after the summer flowers have passed away come the autumn candidates for their share of admiration. The Chrysanthemum receives great attention in this neighbourhood, and an exhibition in the park of this flower attracts thousands in the dull days of November. The plants are brought to great perfection through unwearying diligence and care.⁴⁵⁴

This enthusiastic description follows on directly from chapters on Hyde Park, St. James’s Park and Green Park and Cole makes it clear that Victoria Park does not suffer by the comparison. In fact he draws attention to a feature which seems to have been unique to the latter – the borders around the shrubs

for they are well stocked with Hardy Herbaceous bedding plants, interspersed with bulbs and annuals. Borders of this kind are very attractive, and should be more general in all our public gardens. Some of the mixed beds are neat and pretty,

⁴⁵² *Daily News*, 30 Nov 1863, p. 5.

⁴⁵³ Victoria Park Papers, MBW/OW/VP/006.

⁴⁵⁴ Nathan Cole, *The Royal Parks and Gardens of London, Their History and Mode of Embellishment* (London: Journal of Horticulture Office, 1877), pp. 27-28.

others bold and massive. If flowers and foliage are tastefully combined, there is no doubt about the effect that may be produced in our Parks and Gardens by this method of embellishment.⁴⁵⁵

Few if any parks today attempt the elaborate style of gardening that was expected in Victoria Park in the nineteenth century. As Nathan Cole says ‘unwearying diligence and care’ is needed to maintain such beds and borders. It was part of the skill expected of a head gardener, whether of a park or a stately home, to be able to design the colour schemes and then produce the plants to carry them out. The display of bedding plants would have to be cleared out at the end of the summer and new ones replanted in the spring. From the late 1860s onwards on Government instructions these uprooted plants were distributed to the poor, but as a writer in the *Gardener’s Magazine* – probably Shirley Hibberd himself – pointed out, the gesture was not as generous as it might have seemed – the plants were worn out and would otherwise have been thrown away. On top of that, they needed the resources of a greenhouse and a good gardener to get them through the winter.⁴⁵⁶

Nevertheless, the scheme was very popular and continued to the end of the century – as Walter Wright wrote in 1903 ‘the backstreet horticulturalist does not believe in looking a gift-horse in the mouth. He takes what he can get and makes the best of it – a very good best, too, sometimes.’⁴⁵⁷ Both Charles Poulsen and the authors of *A Pictorial History of Victoria Park*⁴⁵⁸ incorrectly suggest that the plants given away were the surplus from those being planted out. These would have been healthy young stock and Shirley Hibberd, in 1866, had suggested that this is exactly what should be done ‘to give delight’ and ‘stimulate the recipients to careful cultivation of them.’⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 29.

⁴⁵⁶ *Gardener’s Magazine*, 3 Oct 1867, p. 421.

⁴⁵⁷ Walter P. Wright, ‘Gardener’s London’, in *Living London Vol I*, ed. George Sims (London: Cassell, 1903) p. 308.

⁴⁵⁸ Poulsen, *Victoria Park*, p. 42; Philip Mernick and Doreen Kendall, *A Pictorial History of Victoria Park, London E3* (London: East London History Society, 1996), p. 32. The latter shows an engraving from the *Illustrated London News* dated 8 Nov 1879 which the authors suggest shows the distribution of surplus plants in Spring.

⁴⁵⁹ *Gardener’s Magazine*, 21 July 1866, p. 323.

It is clear that Victoria Park was successful in appealing to many aspects of the horticultural life of the neighbourhood and that its standards were as high as any other park with far greater resources. It also turned what could have been seen as a problem – a public road running across the area – into an advantage: the more formal part, with the most elaborate floral beds and borders and the boating lake, was naturally divided from the open grassy area for sports. Many other parks, as described by Hazel Conway, had not been nearly as successful in this aspect of park design as Victoria Park.⁴⁶⁰

Recreation in the Eastern Section of the Park

Although the head gardener would have concentrated his efforts on the floral displays, it must not be forgotten that more than half the space was grassland which also had to be maintained, together with all the trees and shrubs that surrounded the park itself. There were other users of the park apart from those who came to admire the flowers. The whole section east of Grove Road, which ran through the park, was much less formal than the smaller western part. Although there were some borders, and flowerbeds around the Victoria Fountain, the major focus of this part was the practice of more active leisure pursuits than horticulture. The grass must have been kept under control to some extent by the sheep that were allowed to graze there. A letter of 1859 from William Askew, the grazier, states that he had kept sheep and, until 1855, cattle on the land since 1852, paying rent to the Office of Works. However, now he asks for a reduction in his rent because

[t]he increasing popularity of Victoria Park has also tended greatly to depreciate the value of the land for grazing purposes for sheep, which require quiet as well as food. I need scarcely say I allude to the increase of many thousands of persons who attend at the Bathing Lake during the summer months, commencing as early as four o'clock a.m., to the attraction caused by the Sunday Band, and, to the increased accommodation afforded for the practice of cricket, which together affects the entire grazing surface.⁴⁶¹

⁴⁶⁰ Conway, *People's Parks*, pp. 76-107.

⁴⁶¹ Victoria Park Papers, MBW/OW/VP/004.

This letter mentions three of the major attractions of the eastern part of the park: the bathing facilities, the bandstand and the use of the grassland for sports.

Once Victoria Park was open and had its lakes, it was quickly agreed that bathing facilities should be provided in one of them. The first bathing lake was opened in 1847. It quickly proved inadequate for the numbers who wanted to bathe and a larger lake, with a better water supply, was opened a few years later and then extended. Even this did not satisfy the demand and a third, even larger, bathing lake had to be provided in 1876. All these lakes were for men and boys only, as at this time bathing was done in the nude. The site was surrounded by a thick screen of bushes and hours – from 4 a.m. to 8 a.m. – were restricted to times when few people would be out walking. Although diving boards and changing rooms were eventually provided, and a swimming instructor gave lessons, to begin with the lakes were more a place to refresh oneself rather than to go in for sporting activity. At a time when piped water, let alone a bath, was a rarity in East End homes, thousands of men and boys made use of the facility. There was surprise at the Metropolitan Board of Works when so many turned up.⁴⁶² Charles Poulsen writes that it had been widely believed that East Enders were used to dirt and did not mind not washing.⁴⁶³ Writing at the end of the century, Lieut.-Col. Sexby states '[a]s many as 25,000 bathers have been counted on a summer morning before eight o'clock. What an inestimable boon open-air swimming baths like those provided here must prove to the neighbourhood!'⁴⁶⁴ It was not until the early twentieth century that provision was made for women to swim.

The bathing lakes, in the early days, were used more as a place to wash than to exercise. But in a move to encourage fitness, open air gymnasia were provided, where

⁴⁶² Ibid.

⁴⁶³ Poulsen, *Victoria Park*, p. 48.

⁴⁶⁴ Sexby, *The Municipal Parks, Gardens, and Open Spaces of London*, pp. 555-556.

equipment was installed on which people were encouraged to exercise. By 1863 two of them had been put in place which were

immensely popular, both being kept in full work every afternoon by delighted children of all ages...it would be no exaggeration to reckon the self-taught pupils by thousands, and to the credit of the working people it is to be said that notwithstanding the constant crowds and the boisterous character of the amusement, there has not been a single case which it was necessary to take before a magistrate since the opening of the park.⁴⁶⁵

Lord Brabazon, founder of the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association which is discussed at length in Chapter 5, was a great believer in gymnasia and it was one of the aims of his organisation to provide gymnastic equipment in the public gardens and playgrounds the Association opened. His belief, shared by many others, was that

healthy exercise is necessary to the proper physical development of the people, and the nation which neglects the physical condition of its people is not only doomed to destruction, but richly deserves the national effacement which is certain to overtake it.⁴⁶⁶

By the time Lieut.-Col. Sexby made his visit in 1898, there were four gymnasia, two reserved for children. Peter Bailey points out how few were the schools for working class children who provided anything other than drill for their pupils – mainly for reasons of lack of suitable space, though drill was also considered a way to instil discipline.

Organised sports at school were ‘reserved for society’s leaders.’⁴⁶⁷

A very popular pastime among the adults was cricket. Unusually, one of the driving forces behind the provision of properly maintained pitches in Victoria Park was a group of City businessmen, who petitioned the Metropolitan Board of Works in 1863

Working men and clerks employed in the City of London have, in consequence of the Early Closing lately adopted on Saturday afternoons, taken great delight in the establishment of cricket clubs, and they play on a portion of Victoria Park set aside for that purpose...Hundreds of hard-working men, often with their families, crowd the Park on Saturday evenings to play and watch others play.⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁵ *Daily News*, 30 Nov 1863, p. 5.

⁴⁶⁶ Lord Brabazon, *Social Arrows*, 2nd edn (London: Longmans Green, 1887), p. 352.

⁴⁶⁷ Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England*, p. 130.

⁴⁶⁸ Victoria Park Papers, MBW/OW/VP/005.

The introduction of the Saturday half-holiday allowed at least some of the working class more free time in which to pursue hobbies and other leisure activities. In 1871, a locally-organised petition asked for another gate to be made near Annis Road, because so many people attending the cricket matches climbed over the fence in that area and caused accidents. The petitioners continued

That at the time Victoria Park was formed a large space of ground north of the aforesaid Park was a market garden, during the last few years one thousand houses have been built thereon representing at least 5,000 persons, your petitioners feel that the present requirements justify them asking the above mentioned boon.⁴⁶⁹

Lieut.-Col. Sexby found in 1898 that there were thirty-two cricket pitches which were heavily used during the summer season, double the number the *Daily News* had found in 1863, quite apart from ‘the many games of the youngsters, who are allowed to set up their stumps or pile up their jackets on any part of the unappropriated ground.’⁴⁷⁰ Peter Bailey suggests that cricket was a game that met with approval from the believers in rational recreation: there was little encouragement of gambling, it was good-mannered on the pitch which also encouraged good manners among the spectators. ‘It carried with it long-standing associations of a bucolic, pre-industrial society; it was in fact a perfect vehicle for the myths of Merrie England.’⁴⁷¹ Since there was also an element of the ‘bucolic myth’ lying behind the creation of Victoria Park itself, it seems very suitable that cricket should be so popular there.

Football, on the other hand, although originally an equally middle-class game, soon became more associated with the working class, especially in the north. It became increasingly commercialised and by 1885 was a professional game.⁴⁷² As such, it was viewed with some distaste by those who were otherwise keen that the working classes should participate in physical activity. Although football, too, harked back to the

⁴⁶⁹ Victoria Park Papers, MBW/OW/VP/006.

⁴⁷⁰ Sexby, *Municipal Parks, Gardens and Open Spaces of London*, p. 556.

⁴⁷¹ Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England*, p. 128.

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 142.

‘emotional temper and spirit of an earlier society’ it had none of the bucolic connotations of cricket, and the fierce partisanship of the mass of spectators meant that ‘association football [was] generally disqualified from the canon of rational recreation.’⁴⁷³ It was not allowed to be played in Victoria Park until 1888 and then it caused such damage to the turf that after one season adult teams were told to move to Hackney Marshes and only schoolboy teams were permitted.⁴⁷⁴

All these were activities calculated to appeal to men and boys, even if there were women among the spectators at the cricket matches. As early as 1851 there was an appeal to have music in the park and the Band of the Royal Marines was authorised to play there on Tuesday and Friday afternoons. As these were working days, it would have been more likely to appeal to women and children than to men, who would not have been free to come during working hours – although there would no doubt be some shiftworkers or unemployed who would spend time there. Eventually in 1865 James Pennethorne designed a proper bandstand and soon the concerts became a major attraction. Although in the beginning the performers were usually military bands and there was no thought of allowing music on a Sunday, a description from 1888 shows how, as attitudes changed and the strict Sabbatarianism of the earlier years diminished, the style changed and Sunday concerts were much appreciated. A description in the novel *Out Of Work*, by John Law (Margaret Harkness), gives a vivid impression

Victoria Park is one of the few places in which the public can indulge its Sunday taste for music. The men in high hats who play their stringed instruments at the bandstand, probably confer more pleasure than do the greatest opera singers, for their audience is less critical and more appreciative than ladies and gentlemen who can afford guineas for stalls and boxes. Tired mothers luxuriate there under the trees, listen to simple tunes, and doze over their babies; boys and girls play about; men enjoy pipes and gossip...No West end face is to be seen there, no well-dressed man or woman, only workers bent on enjoying their one day of relaxation, on making the most of the few hours they can call their own during the week.⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷³ Ibid., p. 144.

⁴⁷⁴ Poulsen, *Victoria Park*, p. 53.

⁴⁷⁵ Quoted in W.J. Fishman, *East End 1888: A Year in a London Borough Among the Labouring Poor* (London: Duckworth, 1988), p. 319.

This clearly suggests that gentler recreation than that to be found in public houses or music halls could also appeal to the workers of the East End. However, it also suggests that the mingling of the classes that the originators of the park had hoped for was not taking place. Perhaps the middle classes themselves were not yet prepared to be seen enjoying such a pleasure on a Sunday, even if they were no longer determined to ban them to every one else.

In the early days of the park, no provision was made for refreshments. In 1862, Angela Burdett-Coutts donated a magnificent drinking fountain⁴⁷⁶ but, as the *Daily News* wrote in 1863 ‘that is not much in a park of 150 acres...which is always crowded with children, who prefer water to all other drinks.’ The newspaper also lamented the lack of ‘the means of obtaining light and innocent refreshments.’ Although there were sometimes up to thirty thousand visitors a day ‘there are only three small tea, coffee and ice houses.’⁴⁷⁷ There were protests from a correspondent to the *Bethnal Green Times* on behalf of local residents about the setting up of stalls outside the entrances to the park

degrading erections...which give it the appearance of a sort of fair. I mean a stall, erected for the sale of fruit, eatables, ginger beer, etc., and open all Sunday, surrounded by low characters who patronise it, as also a place for taking portraits, but this has a notice, not open on Sundays...I have both seen and heard, respectable visitors in carriages stop and exclaim ‘Look there, could you suppose this would be permitted within so beautiful a place?’⁴⁷⁸

The writer continues that it is not that he objects to the kind of things sold, merely that they are not confined to the refreshment areas inside the park – which are closed on Sundays. Sabbatarianism and class distinctions both play a part in this protest. It is also interesting that at this comparatively early date, and in an area considered so poor, a photographer had considered it worth while setting up a ‘place for taking portraits.’ However, in spite of the

⁴⁷⁶ Shown in the frontispiece to this chapter, p. 104.

⁴⁷⁷ *Daily News*, 30 Nov 1863, p. 5.

⁴⁷⁸ *Bethnal Green Times*, 15 Feb 1862, p. 6.

protests, the stalls remained, as evidenced by a series of postcards.⁴⁷⁹ Even the park keepers sold some refreshments from their lodges, until formally banned from doing so in 1888. Postcards also show that the refreshment houses within the park grew in size as time went on.⁴⁸⁰ By 1897 there were five of them.⁴⁸¹ And, of course, there were all the pubs and hotels outside the park itself which were heavily patronised by park visitors.

Victoria Park was visited by thousands and thousands of people – a report in 1869 states that '[m]ore than 150,000 persons, belonging chiefly to the poorer classes, having been known to visit the park during a single Sunday without any case of drunkenness being observable.'⁴⁸² There were few reports of vandalism. There seems to have been only one incidence of serious misbehaviour. On Sunday 29th January 1865, when nearly fifty thousand people were enjoying a fine frosty day, skating on the lakes, there was a riot lasting for nearly three hours, when 'thousands of lads, and the worst of characters belonging to the east end of London' started throwing snowballs, 'some of which had been laced with ice or stones.' The first people to suffer were on their way home from church but, according to the reporter

the most serious riot commenced soon after 2 o'clock. The roughs lined the carriage road running across the southern portion of the middle, ornamental or centre park, and every carriage, chaise, cart and other vehicle that came up, containing ladies and children, or tradesmen and their wives, were assailed with showers of snowballs, both right and left, demolishing the carriage windows, and doing a great amount of injury to the occupants...The park keepers came up, thinking to quell the disturbance, but their very appearance created derision among the mob, for most of these park constables are old men, perfectly unsuited for such an office, and, as may be conjectured, met with similar ill usage.⁴⁸³

However, it is clear that the trees and shrubs of the park were not damaged by the rioters, it was the churchgoers and promenaders who were the objects of their missiles. It should

⁴⁷⁹ Mernick and Kendall, *A Pictorial History of Victoria Park*, pp. 36, 59.

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 36, 37, 41.

⁴⁸¹ Lieut.-Col. J.J. Sexby, *Notebook of the Parks, Gardens, Recreation Grounds, and Open Spaces of London*, p. 44.

⁴⁸² *Bethnal Green Times*, 20 Feb 1869, p. 2.

⁴⁸³ *Bethnal Green Times*, 4 Feb 1865, p. 3.

also be noted that similar riots took place in Kensington Gardens and St. James's Park,⁴⁸⁴ where the park constables proved just as useless at controlling the mob – making it clear that the East End was not uniquely disorderly.

Conclusion

Victoria Park was a genuine attempt to create a People's Park. Once the decision to build it had been taken, all the features to be expected were granted and paid for by the government. The standard of horticulture it achieved was fully comparable with the other Royal parks of the West End. The displays disseminated horticultural knowledge among the local population. This was an open space, even with a certain amount of wildness – but a controlled wildness, fenced in and supervised by park keepers. There was space for games, gymnasia were provided, swimming lakes were opened - but all of these had rules - what games could be played, when people could swim. It was a public space, open to all - but again, with expectations that people would obey the rules of decency both of behaviour and dress. Patrick Joyce believes the freedom of the public streets and other public places

was realised...as the locus of certain valued and civilised identities, identities which in fact revolved around the necessity of self-government...Public space taught private virtues, virtues which in turn could only be realised in such public spaces, in the sphere of urban interaction.⁴⁸⁵

From its foundation, the motivations behind the foundation of and the uses made of Victoria Park were mixed. Some of the features were provided after local users had made their wishes clear - from a bathing lake to a bandstand. There was scope for those who wished to learn – labels on the trees and in the flowerbeds; those who wanted to exercise – gymnasia and cricket pitches; and those who merely wanted to relax – music and grass to sit on in the shade of a tree. Room was even found for frivolity – the Chinese Pavilion on the island. As Hazel Conway put it, like other parks, it was

⁴⁸⁴ *The Times*, 31 Jan 1865, p. 9; *ibid.*, 16 Feb 1865, p. 6.

⁴⁸⁵ Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom*, p. 201.

literally and symbolically a world apart, providing oases of green in areas of brick and stone, contact with nature and the joy of walking on grass and under the trees.⁴⁸⁶

The people of the East End do not seem to have found the rules imposed too onerous and Victoria Park was enjoyed by many thousands from the 1840s to the present day, even if not always in the ways that the founders of the park had envisaged at the beginning.

⁴⁸⁶ Conway, *People's Parks*, p. 222.

Chapter Four:
Cemeteries

PICTURE DELETED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS

City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery, c. 1860. Collage No. 19718 London Metropolitan Archives.

Introduction

After Victoria Park, the largest landscaped open spaces in the East End were the new cemeteries – Abney Park Cemetery, City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery and Victoria Park Cemetery, all of which, like the park, were opened in the 1840s. There are indeed parallels between these cemeteries and public parks. As Patrick Joyce puts it ‘[t]he new urban cemeteries were...locations for uplifting walking of a quasi-municipal kind.’⁴⁸⁷ Julie Rugg points out that ‘a beautiful cemetery was one of the civilised and civilising elements considered essential to the mid nineteenth-century landscape, and also constituted a valuable amenity for rational recreation.’⁴⁸⁸ Writing of a slightly later period, Julie-Marie Strange also finds similarities of a different sort: ‘Like the park, the municipal cemetery was subject to bye-laws intended to regulate behaviour within the perimeter walls and shape popular perceptions of the ground.’⁴⁸⁹

It is easier to draw parallels between a *municipal* cemetery and a park because neither were concerned with profit. In both cases, the founders were concerned with questions of the health of the population and with the general improvement in behaviour. But although all three East End cemeteries discussed in this chapter were private enterprises rather than municipal, the points made above apply equally to them. However, in the case of the private cemeteries, to a greater or lesser extent, speculators did in addition see the possibility of profit. As Catherine Arnold suggests with reference to cemetery companies ‘the entrepreneurial Victorian spirit [was] coupled with genuine concerns over public health.’⁴⁹⁰ Thomas Laqueur puts the emphasis more strongly on enterprise and argues

⁴⁸⁷ Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom*, p. 221.

⁴⁸⁸ Rugg, ‘The Rise of Cemetery Companies’, p. 46.

⁴⁸⁹ Julie-Marie Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) p. 163.

⁴⁹⁰ Catherine Arnold, *Necropolis: London and Its Dead* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2006) p. 123.

that the deep resonances of death and bodies allowed cemeteries to become the sites for contesting and making manifest the underlying cultural infrastructures of modern capitalism...If one could trade in death one could trade in anything.⁴⁹¹

There were those at the time who also found the commercialisation of interment

distasteful. The Rev. William Stone, Rector of Spitalfields, wrote to Edwin Chadwick

In all ages and nations, the burial of the dead has been invested with peculiar sanctity...it is reasonable, then, that the reverential impressions thus accumulated within us should shrink from the contact of more selfish and vulgar associations. And one may be excused for thinking and speaking strongly in reprobation of a system which degrades the burial of the dead into a trade.⁴⁹²

It may be that it was in response to such sentiments that the prospectuses of all the companies considered in this chapter laid stress on the horticultural beauties of the cemeteries they were planning.

All the private cemetery companies set up in London during the first half of the nineteenth century were joint stock companies. Chris Brooks writes that they 'were...major speculative ventures. As such, they presented complex problems of funding, management, and marketing – all of which, of course, affected and even determined the nature of [the cemeteries'] layout and design.'⁴⁹³ Julie-Marie Strange suggests that perhaps they marked 'the most significant shift in burial practice' in the nineteenth century, 'a phenomenon that moved the business of interment from the near-monopoly of the Anglican Church into a commercial and multi-denominational arena.'⁴⁹⁴ The founders and shareholders of these companies were responding to a great need for more space for burials as urban populations expanded. It was to prove a short lived speculative 'boom', however, for as James Stevens Curl writes

⁴⁹¹ Thomas W. Laqueur, 'Cemeteries, Religion and the Culture of Capitalism' in *Revival and Religion since 1700: Essays for John Walsh*, ed. by Jane Garnett and Colin Matthew (London: Hambledon Press, 1993), p. 186.

⁴⁹² 'Report on the sanitary condition of the labouring population of Great Britain. Supplementary Report on the Results of an enquiry into the practice of interment in towns', *Parliamentary Papers* 1843 vol xii. 509.

⁴⁹³ Chris Brooks, *Mortal Remains: The History and Present State of the Victorian and Edwardian Cemetery* (Exeter: Wheaton Publishers, 1989) p. 24.

⁴⁹⁴ Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain*, p. 3.

by the 1870s most of the problems associated with the disposal of the dead had been resolved, and even the poor were catered for in the Burial Board and municipal cemeteries.⁴⁹⁵

However, in the middle years of the nineteenth century, that solution had yet to be achieved and nowhere was the problem greater than in London. The urban population had grown so much that the existing churchyards and burial grounds were becoming impossibly overcrowded and there were growing fears for public health.

Although there have been studies of cemeteries, of Victorian burial customs and of the architecture of nineteenth century tombs,⁴⁹⁶ most have been general and have dealt with cemeteries throughout the United Kingdom. None has attempted to point out the difficulties that had to be overcome in setting up a cemetery nor considered the particular circumstances of cemeteries in a district as mixed in class population as that of the East End of London. This chapter will show how local and ecclesiastical reluctance had to be overcome in order to create a cemetery in the first place. It will also suggest that although beautifully laid out cemeteries in more prosperous areas such as those of Kensal Green and Highgate might be profitable, in that they attracted a fashionable and wealthy clientele, their success might have encouraged the promoters of cemeteries in the East End to an over-optimistic view of the profits they might accrue. For, however attractive a cemetery might be in the East End, it could not hope to attract such patrons and the smaller revenue led to a fairly rapid falling off in standards.

This chapter will consider in detail three examples of private cemeteries in the East End of London, financed by the issue of shares: Abney Park Cemetery (1840), City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery (1841) and Victoria Park Cemetery (1845), each of which has been chosen to represent a particular type and to illustrate different aspects of the creation and maintenance of a cemetery. There were, in addition to the three chosen, at

⁴⁹⁵ James Stevens Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2004), p. 176.

⁴⁹⁶ As well as Chris Brooks' *Mortal Remains* and James Stevens Curl's *The Victorian Celebration of Death*, Professor Curl has written widely on all aspects of Victorian cemeteries and burial customs. An overview of most of the surviving London cemeteries can be found in Hugh Meller, *London Cemeteries: An Illustrated Guide and Gazetteer* (Amersham: Avebury Publishing Company, 1981).

least five other very small private cemeteries in the East End of London at the time, most of which did not have the least pretension to be anything other than a place to bury bodies as cheaply as possible. They tended to be the property of one individual and were completely unregulated. Mrs. Basil Holmes, who surveyed all the burial grounds of the metropolis in 1895, wrote that by the beginning of the nineteenth century the churchyards and parish burial grounds were becoming so overcrowded that ‘it occurred to some adventurers to start cemeteries as private speculations’. She continued

[t]he owners of these private grounds were naturally tempted to crowd them to excess, and it is impossible to think of what took place in some of them without shuddering...the over-crowding of the private grounds is so associated with the idea of private gloating over private gains that it is more repulsive.⁴⁹⁷

She goes on to point out that by the time her book came out, these private cemeteries had virtually disappeared: all had become far too full to take any further burials and were therefore completely neglected; several had been taken over as builders’ or carters’ yards. The cemeteries discussed in this thesis all had ambitions to be more than such unpleasant dumping grounds and all included plans to beautify the setting by means of horticulture.

Abney Park, approximately 30 acres in extent, was established by Dissenters, well financed and carefully landscaped. It was the first garden cemetery in England. It received its first burial in May 1840. According to Paul Joyce ‘[t]he Company prospered from the start, recording more than 5000 burials in the first decade, rising to nearly 9000 for the five years 1850-55.’⁴⁹⁸

City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery was approximately 33 acres in extent and also promised much, both in its design and in the financial gains available to shareholders. It opened in 1841 and in its early days, with its two chapels and an entrance lodge praised by John Claudius Loudon, landscape designer, horticulturalist and author of *On The Laying Out of Cemeteries*, it was attractively spacious. However, it was unable to

⁴⁹⁷ Mrs. Basil Holmes, *The London Burial Grounds: Notes on their History from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (1896) (London: Macmillan, 1896), pp. 191-193.

⁴⁹⁸ Paul Joyce, *A Guide to Abney Park Cemetery* (London: Abney Park Cemetery Trust, 2nd edn. 1994) p. 53.

maintain its standards and was in a sad state of disrepair by the end of the century. The fortunate survival of two bundles of accounts associated with the foundation of this cemetery allows a consideration of the extremely lengthy and complicated business of acquiring the land for a consecrated cemetery and also sheds some light on the reaction of the surrounding community to the acquisition of land near their houses for such a use.

Victoria Park Cemetery was small, only approximately 9 acres, and over-ambitious in its promises and financial projections. It opened in 1845 and quickly declined into almost as overcrowded and neglected state as the churchyards it was intended to replace. This cemetery drew its shareholders to a great extent from the local community and was created on land owned by one man.

All three are important to this thesis in terms of the amount of landscaped open space they contributed to the East End. In their early days, before they became overcrowded, they provided not only a location for a decent burial but also a pleasant place to stroll in, comparable with Highgate Cemetery, of which Edwin Chadwick wrote in 1843

The establishment of a cemetery at Highgate was strongly opposed by the inhabitants, but when its decorations with flowers and shrubs and trees and its quiet and seclusion were seen, applications were made for the keys, which conferred the privilege of walking in the cemetery at whatever time the purchaser pleased.⁴⁹⁹

However, as this chapter shows, the cemeteries filled up and fell into a state of neglect. Later in the century, the Open Space Societies saw the possibilities the disused burial grounds and some of the now overcrowded cemeteries offered in the way of open space for the East End and turned them into gardens and parks for the local population.

⁴⁹⁹ Report on the sanitary condition of the labouring population, p. 144

Background to the development of cemeteries

Church burial grounds were in such a disgusting state, especially in London, that serious discussion of the provision of cemeteries had begun in the 1820s. The burial grounds were so overcrowded that the digging of new graves often disinterred bones of earlier burials. 'Even more revolting were the facilities for vault burial in certain Dissenters' chapels,' writes James Stevens Curl, 'coffins would find their way back to the undertakers and the bodies would be disposed of by any means available (often involving axes, saws, and a furnace).'⁵⁰⁰ A London barrister, George Carden, had visited the cemetery of Père Lachaise in Paris in 1821. This took advantage of a beautiful hilly site with trees and other landscaping to make an attractive park-like setting for a huge new cemetery for Paris. In 1825 Carden tried to promote a similar undertaking for London. Nothing came of the suggestion, but undeterred he tried again in 1830 with more success and by 1832 an Act of Parliament 'for establishing a General Cemetery for the Interment of the Dead in the Neighbourhood of the Metropolis',⁵⁰¹ gave permission for the creation of a cemetery in Kensal Green. The Company responsible for it, the General Cemetery Company, had been founded in 1830 and Kensal Green Cemetery received its first burial in January 1833. According to James Stevens Curl, 'the huge success and immediate fame of the General Cemetery of All Souls at Kensal Green encouraged the formation of other commercial cemeteries that followed in rapid succession.'⁵⁰² Many of these were in the provinces, but the next one in London was the South Metropolitan Cemetery Company in 1836, whose cemetery in Norwood was opened in 1837. Also in 1836 came the London Cemetery Company, who founded cemeteries in Highgate (parts of which were consecrated in 1839) and Nunhead (of which a portion was consecrated in 1840). In 1837.

⁵⁰⁰ Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death*, p. 40.

⁵⁰¹ An Act for Establishing a General Cemetery for the Interment of the Dead in the Neighbourhood of the Metropolis, 2 & 3 Will.IV c.110.

⁵⁰² Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death*, p. 68.

the West of London and Westminster Cemetery Company was established, and their Brompton Cemetery was opened in June 1840.⁵⁰³

As commercial enterprises, which had involved large sums in their setting up, the main priority for the investors in cemetery companies was to obtain a return on their money. This could only come from the sale of burial plots and graves and they were therefore eager to attract a well-off clientele who would be prepared to pay large sums for them. Such a clientele tended to be Anglicans. All the large private cemeteries were divided into consecrated and unconsecrated sections, with separate chapels for each, so that Anglicans and Dissenters need not mingle, even when dead. The pressure for this separation came from some of the Anglican clergy, who would not allow those not of the Church of England to be buried in consecrated ground, and from some Anglicans themselves. The Dissenters did not consider the matter of much importance.⁵⁰⁴

Consecration was an expensive and lengthy procedure, but as James Curl writes 'sectarian hatred was very much alive and well in nineteenth-century England and to say there were frictions between Anglicans and Nonconformists would be putting things very mildly indeed',⁵⁰⁵ and it was a necessity if Anglicans were to choose to be buried there. Abney Park was different, in that it was conceived as a cemetery which would primarily appeal to Nonconformists and there was never any intention to have any part of it consecrated. The directors of Victoria Park Cemetery suggested in their prospectus that the cemetery would be consecrated, but in fact it never was. The City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery was the only one of the three to become a consecrated cemetery.

Whether consecrated or not, the private cemetery promoters were conscious that the burial place they provided had to appeal to the emotions of those who would pay to bury

⁵⁰³ All dates taken from *The Victorian Celebration of Death*, pp. 83, 86, 92, 95-96.

⁵⁰⁴ See *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates* 13 July 1836, vol. 35, cc 161-165. Members were discussing the South Metropolitan Cemetery and several of them were firmly against the demarcation between the different parts of a cemetery.

⁵⁰⁵ Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death*, p. 103.

their loved ones there. It was not enough that the health of the living would be protected by better standards of interment. Consecration and cemetery layout in general were important because, as Doris Francis, Leonie Kellaher and Georgina Neophytou write ‘ways of disposing of the dead are not casual. They tend to be deeply embedded in cultural tradition, with strong emotional and often religious associations.’⁵⁰⁶ They go on to state

throughout English history, the enclosed garden has been seen as engendering repose and promoting harmony, its flowers and trees emblematic of spiritual truths, beauty and order...Perhaps it was this ideal of the garden as a spiritual and palliative resource that led to its being privileged as an ideal accompaniment for burial.⁵⁰⁷

Such a concept was reflected in much the Victorians wrote about cemeteries. As the *Illustrated Guide to Kensal Green Cemetery* put it ‘our minds are elevated by the many peaceful associations of the scene and those great truths so silently yet eloquently asserted in a garden of the dead.’⁵⁰⁸ Edwin Chadwick, less poetically, referred to the practical advantages of

the practice of ornamenting graves with flowers, shrubs, and trees. A rich vegetation exercises a powerful purifying influence, and where the emanations are moderate, as from single graves, would go far to prevent the escape of any deleterious miasma.

He particularly praises Abney Park Cemetery in this respect.⁵⁰⁹ There was a widespread belief that contact with nature was capable of improving people morally as well as physically, whether this contact took place in a cemetery or a park. As more attempts were made to provide such natural-seeming open spaces in urban settings, the source of inspiration for both types were to be found in the existing parks around stately homes.

When it came to creating cemeteries in the East End, just as the creators of Victoria Park took advantage of existing open space and improved it, so did the men who founded cemeteries. Like the park, the cemeteries had to be within reasonable reach of the

⁵⁰⁶ Doris Francis, Leonie Kellaher, Georgina Neophytou, *The Secret Cemetery* (Oxford: Berg, 2005) p. xvi.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 6.

⁵⁰⁸ Quoted in Garnett and Matthew, *Revival and Religion since 1700*, p. 185.

⁵⁰⁹ Report on the sanitary condition of the labouring population of Great Britain. A supplementary report on the results of a special enquiry into the practice of interment in towns. 1843. *Parliamentary Papers*, vol. xii.509, p. 132.

community they were intended to benefit. The advertisements placed in the *Morning Chronicle* in 1838, to encourage shareholders in the City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery, stressed that

The purpose of the present Company is to establish a Cemetery for the district above mentioned, to be situate within the boundaries of the Tower Hamlets, sufficiently removed from the great objections to the burial of the dead in a densely populated neighbourhood, but at the same time so conveniently placed as to be accessible to all.⁵¹⁰

As stated above, the idea of a private burial ground was not new. One, the East London Cemetery, was not one of the notoriously over-crowded speculative ventures described by Mrs. Basil Holmes. The proprietor advertised in the *Morning Chronicle* in the same month as the City of London and Tower Hamlets Company, and in terms that show exactly the same concerns as the larger enterprises, with the same mixture of aesthetic and economic interests

East London Cemetery near Beaumont-square, Mile End, is very conveniently situated on the verge of the Metropolis; it is ornamentally planted with groves and shrubs, which afford a suitable accompaniment of foliage and flowers to the tombs, and commodious walks to the affectionate visitors of them...The terms are much lower than in the generality of the church-yards, and the approbation of the public is attested by upwards of 500 interments, which took place therein last year.⁵¹¹

The cemeteries considered in this chapter were different, in that they were owned by companies and were much more extensive. Nevertheless, to those who would use them, they must have seemed very similar to those with which they were already familiar.

Abney Park Cemetery

Abney Park Cemetery, about 30 acres in extent, was, according to James Stevens Curl, 'the first Victorian garden-cemetery that really can be called by that name.'⁵¹² The man behind its foundation was George Collison, son of the President of the Hackney

⁵¹⁰ *Morning Chronicle*, 11 Oct 1838, p. 1. The site they proposed was, in fact, part of the land that James Pennethorne had wished to purchase for his preferred location for Victoria Park.

⁵¹¹ *Morning Chronicle*, 3 Oct 1838, p. 1.

⁵¹² Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death*, p. 107

Congregational Theological College. All nine trustees of the Company (of which Collison was one) were Congregationalists and, as stated above, there was never any question that any part of the new cemetery would be consecrated. Its original prospectus stated

The object of the Company, is the establishment of a General Cemetery for the City of London and its eastern and north-eastern suburbs, which shall be open to all classes of the community and to all denominations of Christians without restraint in forms.⁵¹³

The site chosen was the former park of Abney House, which had been the home of prominent Dissenters from the time of Cromwell onwards. By 1839 it was tenantless and the Company was able to buy its approximately thirty acres for £12,080. Collison intended burial in the cemetery to be available not only to the wealthy but to all inhabitants of

the city of London, with the boroughs of Finsbury and the Tower Hamlets ...and indeed, from London Bridge on the south, to Tottenham, Edmonton, and even Enfield, on the north; and from Clerkenwell on the one hand, to the densely populated and extensive parishes of Stepney and Limehouse on the other.⁵¹⁴

Like Carden, Collison had been deeply impressed by the beauty of Père Lachaise, and also by the American cemetery of Mount Auburn, near Boston which, he wrote, 'in its constitution and general arrangements, is in a great degree similar to our own cemetery at Abney Park.'⁵¹⁵ Both of these earlier cemeteries were based on already existing parks, with mature trees and undulating landscape. Abney Park was fortunate in that it also had these advantages, which the other newly-created cemeteries of London lacked. As Collison wrote 'Undisturbed possession is the best protector of aged or valuable shrubs and trees, and these are ornaments so peculiarly adapted for places of sepulture, that the most costly and elegant architecture will not compensate for their absence.'⁵¹⁶ He also noted

⁵¹³ George Collison, *Cemetery Interment: Containing a Concise History of the Modes of Interment Practised by the Ancients: Descriptions of Père La Chaise, the Eastern Cemeteries and those of America; the English Metropolitan and Provincial Cemeteries, and More Particularly of Abney Park Cemetery, at Stoke Newington; with a Descriptive Catalogue of its Plants and Arboretum* (London: Longman Orme Brown Green & Longman, 1840) p. 195.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

that Mount Auburn's founders had originally intended to establish alongside it an 'experimental garden of horticulture' and that this would have been an excellent plan

for while, on the one hand, the taste and skill necessarily employed in the horticultural department would give additional interest and beauty to the cemetery generally, the study of flowers so naturally, and almost unavoidably, leads the mind to contemplation and reflection, that one can hardly imagine a more appropriate place for the exhibition of these *beautiful wonders* of the Almighty, than in the quiet and peaceful sanctuaries of the dead.⁵¹⁷

It was presumably in response to this idea of creating a place of 'contemplation and reflection' that Collison was inspired to lay out the arboretum and rosarium⁵¹⁸ that were important features in Abney Park Cemetery. He may also have been familiar with John Claudius Loudon's writings from the 1830s, which suggested the same combination of beauty and education. One of the early shareholders in the Cemetery Company was George Loddiges, of the famous nursery and arboretum that was only a mile or so away from Abney Park. Within the overall design of the cemetery, which was carried out by Professor William Hosking, Loddiges planted up an arboretum with about 2500 specimens of shrubs and trees and a rosarium of between three and four acres containing 1029 varieties of roses.⁵¹⁹ All this was in place when the cemetery opened for its first burial in June 1840, and a selection of magnolias, rhododendrons and other American shrubs was due to be added in the autumn. Collison was obviously so proud of this unique feature that he added a complete catalogue of its plants in his 1840 publication, *Cemetery Interment*, in which he gave his views on public burial and on the advantages of a new kind of cemetery, exemplified by Abney Park. The arboretum included both common and more exotic specimens, all carefully labelled 'on brick, the same as in the Hackney arboretum.'⁵²⁰ The mourners coming to visit the graves could thereby learn from their visit, as could parties of children who were taken for walks in the cemetery.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid., p. 112.

⁵¹⁸ An arboretum was a collection of trees, a rosarium a collection of roses. Many stately homes would often have one or both.

⁵¹⁹ Curl, *The Victorian Way of Death*, pp. 100-106.

⁵²⁰ Quoted in David Solman, *Loddiges of Hackney*, p. 61. Loddiges Nursery was sometimes referred to as 'the Hackney Arboretum'.

When Loudon visited the cemetery in 1843, he described it as ‘the most highly ornamented cemetery in the neighbourhood of London, as far as respects plants’ and in addition to the trees and shrubs, mentioned ‘dahlias, geraniums, fuchsias, verbenas, petunias, etc.’⁵²¹ He also drew attention to the fact that ‘the custom of planting flowers on graves is common throughout Europe’⁵²² and a later visitor, James Branwhite French, wrote

it is touching to see, in Abney Park, on almost any day in spring and summer-time, the widow and orphan, the bereaved mother or father, or the young child with solemn countenance, carrying flowers, and planting them on the graves of their loved ones.⁵²³

Two visitors from Hull, seeking inspiration for the cemetery that was to be created in their town, visited it in 1846 and noted that it was

[l]aid out with great taste, with parterres of sweet scented flowers, picturesque trees and clumps of evergreens scattered about in the most appropriate situations.⁵²⁴

In 1866, in the Evangelical magazine *The Day of Rest*, Abney Park Cemetery was described as having ‘a peculiar beauty, owing to the fineness of the trees and their funereal character. Here are goodly groups of firs, yews, and some splendid cedars...The dark colour of this vegetation is an excellent relief to the monuments, and to the other trees and flowers.’⁵²⁵ There is no question but that Abney Park Cemetery retained much of the character of a park. Loudon complained that garden cemeteries in general bore too great a resemblance to pleasure grounds. He did not approve of deciduous trees and winding paths. He added ‘That they are much frequented and admired by the public is no proof that they are in appropriate taste, but only that they are at present the best places of the kind to

⁵²¹ John Claudius Loudon, *On the Laying Out, Planting, and Managing of Cemeteries and on the Improvement of Churchyards* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1848. repr. London: Iwelet Books Ltd., 1981), p. 22.

⁵²² Loudon, *On the Laying Out, Planting and Management of Cemeteries*, p. 21.

⁵²³ James Branwhite French, *Walks in Abney Park: With Life-Photographs of Ministers and Other Public Men Whose Names Are Found There* (London: James Clarke & Co., 1883) p. 117.

⁵²⁴ Quoted in Julie Rugg, ‘The Rise of Cemetery Companies in Britain 1820-1835’, p. 248.

⁵²⁵ ‘Pencilings in the Suburban Cemeteries: Abney Park’, *The Day Of Rest*, September 1866, p. 269.

which the public have access.’⁵²⁶ When parks were more generally available, he continued, people would come to understand that cemeteries should have a distinctive character of their own.

It was important to the reputation of the cemetery – and hence its ability to attract a higher class of burials – that all aspects of it should be of the highest standard. The chaplain of Abney Park wrote, in 1869

the visitor will be at once impressed by the evidences of the great care and attention which have been bestowed upon the general arrangement, and the daily efforts of the Company to keep church and tree, flower and shrub and monumental stone, in a state of perfection and beauty.⁵²⁷

He does not say how many men were involved in these efforts, but in December 1853 the cemetery had ‘seven regular men’ and an unspecified number of ‘supernumeraries’.⁵²⁸

Loudon had very clear ideas on what should be done

[t]he grass should be kept short and smooth by frequent mowing; the gravel free from weeds and smooth by frequent weeding and rolling...the leaves, as they drop from the trees, should be picked up the same day on which they fell...Every person having shrubs or flowers planted on a grave, we would require to pay a sum sufficient to keep them trimmed for such a number of years as they might think fit; or to keep them in order themselves, under the penalty of having them rooted up and grass substituted, if neglected for a period varying according to the kind of plants. Flowers and roses require to be attended to weekly during summer, but evergreen shrubs may grow for years with scarcely any attendance. As flowers and low shrubs are very apt to get tawdry when neglected, as soon as keeping them in order ceases to be paid for...the plants should be taken up and grass substituted.⁵²⁹

Loudon advocated that grave-owners should pay a sum for the cemetery gardeners to care for the graves. An item submitted to the *Gardener's Magazine* in 1864 suggests what might happen if anyone tried to do his own planting.

[t]he gardeners on the establishment are naturally jealous that anybody should employ his own gardener to plant on a grave, and consider it an invasion of their profits, if not of their rights...A stranger no sooner planted a grave and left it, but the flowers, shrubs, or trees, were pulled up and put back again, not quite so firmly,

⁵²⁶ Loudon, *On the Laying Out, Planting and Management of Cemeteries*, p. 21.

⁵²⁷ Rev. Thomas B. Barker, *Abney Park Cemetery: A Complete Descriptive Guide to Every Part of this Beautiful Depository of the Dead* (London: Houlston & Wright, 1869) p. iii.

⁵²⁸ Directors' Minute Book 1850-61, Dec. 6 1853, D/B/ABN/1/4, Hackney Archives, London.

⁵²⁹ Loudon, *On The Laying Out, Planting and Management of Cemeteries*, pp. 38-39.

so that they dwindled. The unlucky planter, when he complained, was coolly told that the gardener only charged half-a-guinea a year to look after the plants properly.⁵³⁰

This cemetery is unnamed, and no evidence has been found to suggest that this was a problem in Abney Park Cemetery – or indeed in either of the other cemeteries considered in this chapter. However, in general it indicates that just as the cemetery proprietors looked on the burial ground as a source of profit, so did their employees, it seems. There also seems to be some confusion over where public and private space intersected – the gardeners obviously felt that they too had rights over the privately owned graves.

From the very beginning, Abney Park had a clear price structure for the different classes of graves: common graves without a stone, common graves with a stone, reserved ground, and 4 and 5 guinea graves.⁵³¹ In 1853, it cost £1 to bury an adult in a common grave, and 15s. for a child. If the grave was to have an inscription, it would cost £1.10s for an adult and £1.5s for a child.⁵³² Abney Park seems to be unique in offering inscriptions on common graves. But by 1855 it had been decided that inscriptions should be discontinued for common graves.⁵³³ The Account Books for the cemetery have not survived, so it is not possible to make a comparison over time as to how much money was received.

By 1883, about seventy-two thousand bodies had been buried in Abney Park Cemetery. It was becoming crowded, and some of the shrubberies around the perimeter had been drastically reduced to allow for more common graves. It had, writes Paul Joyce, author of the most recent history of Abney Park, ‘embarked upon its long century of decline and erosion.’⁵³⁴ But even in the 1890s the Company was prepared to embark on a massive replanting scheme. Ancient elms that had decayed were replaced with Lombardy

⁵³⁰ ‘Gardening In Cemeteries’, *Gardener’s Magazine*, 19 March 1864, p. 95.

⁵³¹ ‘Common graves’ – in which more than one corpse was buried – were cheaper than single graves and were often placed towards the edge of the cemetery or in out of the way parts of it.

⁵³² Directors’ Minute Book, 1850-1861, 4 Oct 1853, D/B/ABN/1/4.

⁵³³ *Ibid.*, 3 July 1855.

⁵³⁴ Joyce, *A Guide To Abney Park Cemetery*, p. 58.

poplars; the yews with black poplars. Some of the spacious garden character was lost when the pressure for more burial space meant that new graves were inserted between the older ones. As so often, aesthetics were forced to give way to economic reality and the desire for profit as the cemetery neared the end of its productive life.

Abney Park Cemetery had started out with the advantage of being created within an existing estate, with established landscaping that could be improved and extended to make a suitable garden-like setting for a burial ground. It was also further from a neighbourhood already built up, with nearby factories and railways. The City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery and Victoria Park Cemetery had no such advantages, and could scarcely hope to appeal to many middle class potential clients. Abney Park, the first garden cemetery, set high standards that showed what could be achieved in cemetery design. Its ambition to be an attractive open space as well as an appropriately quiet and peaceful enclosure was fully realised for almost sixty years.

The City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery

Unlike Abney Park Cemetery, the City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery was founded by Anglicans, though both groups were largely City men. Abney Park had the advantage of a pleasant site, the former grounds of a large house, and consciously exploited it as a major reason for choosing to be buried in the cemetery. The promoters of the City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery were less fortunate. The site they chose was far less attractive, being largely flat farmland to the south of the Mile End Road. Their Company had been formed in 1838, and in November of that year had begun the process of introducing a bill in Parliament which would establish the Cemetery and allow part of it to be consecrated. Thanks to the survival of two large bundles of accounts – the

Parliamentary Bill and the General Bill⁵³⁵ – from the legal firm of Templar, Shearman and Slater, beginning in November 1838 and finishing in September 1842, it is possible to follow the whole process of setting up the Cemetery from start to finish. This offers an important insight into the problems involved in such an enterprise, from convincing local inhabitants to give their consent to the time and expense needed to obtain the Private Act needed before consecration.

Setting Up The Cemetery

Although as stated there have been many studies of Victorian cemeteries, most have been concerned with the design and the architecture of the monuments. None have shown just how involved was the process in acquiring land and having it consecrated. Julie Rugg, in her 1992 thesis ‘The Rise of Cemetery Companies in Britain 1820-1853’ studied 113 cemetery companies established between those dates, but was concerned with the ‘range of attitudes towards the problems associated with intramural interment.’⁵³⁶ She does not give any detail on the practicalities of setting up a cemetery. A close study of the Templar, Shearman and Slater bills is of importance in showing why it was that only a company with confidence in the future profitability of its enterprise would embark on the process. There is also information about how the local community viewed the coming of a cemetery – although as will be seen much of the proposed area was open, there were many more houses relatively nearby than had been the case with Abney Park. The bills also show that though much was made in the prospectus of the planned beauties of the surrounding planting, very little was actually spent on the horticultural aspects of the cemetery.

By the time of the first entry in the Parliamentary Bill in November 1838, Parliamentary Agents had been engaged to assist the process of getting the bill through,

⁵³⁵ Parliamentary Bill CTHC/2/17; General Bill CTHC/2/19, London Metropolitan Archives, London.

⁵³⁶ Rugg, ‘The Rise of Cemetery Companies in Britain 1820-1853’, p. 6.

together with the architects Thomas Henry Wyatt and David Brandon, and many meetings held. The first step was to draft a Notice of Intent, which had to be affixed to the church doors in all the neighbouring parishes. This notice also had to be inserted in, according to the lawyers' bill, the *Gazette*, the *Times* and the *Morning Advertiser*. On 11th November, the lawyers' clerks set off, and fixed the notice to twenty-five churches. They returned on the following two Sundays to make sure it was still there. This alone cost one guinea a time. Next, notices had to be served on owners, lessees and occupiers of houses within 300 yards of the proposed Cemetery. Basically, these were in the Mile End Road, Bridge Street and on Bow Common. It cost £21 6s 8d to do the North side of the Mile End Road, £20 for the South side and £7 16s 8d for Bridge Street and Bow Common. Having spent a total of £93 0s 8d on these and other preliminaries, on March 9th 1839 the directors decided not to go ahead with presenting the bill to Parliament in that Session, and in fact it was not until September 1840 that they started the whole process again and this time they saw it through to the end, when the Act finally received the Royal Assent in the middle of June 1841.

It may be that the directors decided not to proceed in 1839 because, although the site had been chosen, the purchases of the land had not been finalised. They had settled on a rectangle of 33 acres just south of Mile End Road and Bow Road, bounded on the south by the Blackwall Extension Railway and part of Bow Common. This was about one acre more than the area of Abney Park Cemetery, and three times the size of Victoria Park Cemetery. Unlike Abney Park or Victoria Park Cemeteries, there were three main landowners involved and consequently nothing was straightforward. The largest portion, approximately 24 acres, was being sold by the executors of Mr. Foster. The first meeting noted about this was on March 15th 1839, when the two architects of the cemetery, Wyatt and Brandon, a representative of the Company, Mr. Deputy Tyars, and one of the lawyers, (probably Mr. Shearman, who was named as Clerk and Registrar of the Company in an

advertisement of 1842⁵³⁷), met Mr. Ford, an employee of the executors.⁵³⁸ It actually took until 11th November 1840 to finalise the purchase, and cost £221 18s. 2d in legal fees. The final price paid was £4863 3s 0d.

Just as was the case with the land needed for Victoria Park there were problems because the plot was tenanted. A farmer, Mr Johnson, had a lease which had a year to run. He wanted compensation for leaving early, but the Foster Trustees refused to contribute. Then there was an attempt to sell off the crops on the land and a debate on their value. No sooner was that settled – in May 1840, with Johnson allowed to hold the grass land until the Company was ready to begin work – than a difficulty arose about a precise identification of the land purchased. The lawyers inspected old parish maps (mostly useless), went through rate books for the last hundred years and consulted men who had lived many years in Mile End, who then had to be persuaded to make written declarations at the Lambeth Street Police Station in August 1840. In the same month, the directors asked permission to start work on the boundary wall, but it was refused. Eventually, they were allowed to start excavating for the wall and carting the bricks in September, on condition that ‘the earth should be replaced and the bricks removed on notice.’⁵³⁹

Four sets of lawyers were involved throughout: Templar, Shearman and Slater in Great Tower Street; Mr. Roberts, the Conveyancer, in the Inner Temple; Bourdillon and Son, who held the Title Deeds, and Mr. Ker, the Counsel for the Cemetery Company. All documents, of course, had to be copied by hand and delivered either by a clerk or by a messenger between the various offices. There are an enormous number of entries showing how difficult it could be to make contact with the various parties involved, such as: ‘not having heard from Mr. Roberts,’⁵⁴⁰ ‘letter to Mr. Bourdillon requesting a reply to our

⁵³⁷ *The Times*, 1 Nov 1842, p. 2

⁵³⁸ General Bill, CTHC/2/19, pp. 1-3

⁵³⁹ General Bill, CTHC/2/19, p. 19.

⁵⁴⁰ General Bill, CTHC/2/19, p. 15.

letter,’⁵⁴¹ ‘attending Mr. Ker in conference.’⁵⁴² In this pre-telephonic age, there were many, many fruitless visits to people who were out, but the Cemetery Company still had to pay for the time spent. Every visit near Shearman’s office cost 6s 8d; every visit further afield 13s 4d, every letter cost 5s 0d. As has already been shown in the account of Victoria Park, the acquisition of land to create any form of open space was not easy and was often expensive and lengthy. This was a period of expansion in the East End and owners must have been aware of the value of their land for housebuilding. They would not give it up cheaply.

The next land purchase was for 2 acres adjoining Foster’s land from Mrs Elinor Knapp and her son Edmund. They lived in Cheltenham, and negotiations were conducted by their solicitors. Again, the land was farmed by tenants, both of Bromley. The first entry appears in the accounts on December 17th 1840 and although the agreement was made in May 1841 and a payment of £700 to the Knapps and £30 to their tenants was made in July 1841, Edmund Knapp died before the sale could be completed.⁵⁴³ This was potentially disastrous, as before the Bishop of London would agree to consecrate the ground, all the titles to the Cemetery land had to be completely clear – hence the need to be absolutely sure what land had been purchased from the Foster estate. Bonds of indemnity and conveyances had to be signed by Mrs. Knapp and Edmund’s heir and sent over to the Bishop’s residence.⁵⁴⁴ The Cemetery Company was still attempting, unsuccessfully, to change the arrangements in September 1842.

The final purchase was of ‘Waste and Cottages on Bow Common.’⁵⁴⁵ Negotiations began at the beginning of May 1841. This section of land was part of the Manor of Stepney, and after the purchase price of £300 had been paid, the Company had to be enfranchised and admitted at a Court Baron which was held on 7th December at the Green

⁵⁴¹ Ibid., p. 6.

⁵⁴² Ibid., p. 9.

⁵⁴³ Ibid., pp. 38-41.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 44.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid., CTHC/2/19, p. 31.

Man in Bethnal Green, though the Deed of Enfranchisement was not finalised until 29th December.

There were other smaller agreements with local men which demonstrate further the complexities, notably the owner of a rope walk which bordered the Cemetery. Although the quantity of land in question was only small, it still took an immense amount of trouble to acquire it, even though it was only to be leased, not purchased. It shows how reluctant local proprietors could be to the idea of ceding land to the cemetery company and the difficulties that had to be overcome before construction could begin. The Company wanted a small piece of the rope ground near Bow Common 'in consideration of the sum of ten shillings of lawful British money' and a 'yearly rent of one shilling.'⁵⁴⁶ It was to be allowed to sink a well on the land and join it to another on Cemetery land by means of a tunnel. It would also be allowed to build a stable and building over the well for a horse pump. The Company would have first refusal if ever the land was to be sold, but if it vacated the land it would undertake to leave it in a good state or pay a penalty of £20. This might have seemed a simple matter to settle, but it clearly shows how easily the lawyers' fees could mount up. Mr. Soanes sen., owner of the rope walk, refused to sign the Agreement before his son had seen it. On May 3rd the lawyers waited 'upwards of 2 hours' but the son did not come. They returned on May 4th, on the understanding that Mr. Soanes jun. would meet them at 11, 'but after waiting from 11 to 2 Mr. Soanes Junr. then sent word that he could not give us the Meeting today.' They went back to see Mr. Soanes sen. that evening, and he asked them to come back the following day at 11. They duly did, saw Mr. Soanes jun. 'who stated that he had not had time to consider the Agreement but that he would do so in a day or two and let us know from him or through his Solicitor whether he would sign it or not.' On May 25th the Agreement was returned by the Soanes, unsigned and altered. The lawyer charged 5s. to 'peruse' it. Although it was not what they had

⁵⁴⁶ Agreement on 2nd May 1842 with John Soanes of Bow Common Ropemaker and Samuel Dawson Soanes of the same place Ropemaker, CTHC/2/3.

stipulated, the Company decided ‘under the circumstances it was considered necessary to yield.’ On June 7th the lawyers went back to get Mr. Soanes sen. to sign, but ‘he was from home and would not return until very late at night and we made an appointment for to see Mr. Soanes tomorrow at ½ past 2.’ On June 8th they went back, but Mr. Soanes sen. ‘stated he would not sign the Agreement until his Son had and that we had better go over to his Son’s residence at Ratcliffe and endeavour to obtain his signature. Attending on Mr. Soanes Junr. at his residence accordingly when he signed Agreement.’ On June 11th ‘Attending on Mr. Soanes Senr. when he at length signed Agreement.’⁵⁴⁷ Each visit when they had to wait was charged at 13s 4d, each other visit was charged at 6s. 8d. Add in the expenses of drafting and writing up the agreement, obtaining these two signatures cost the Company £5 15s 0d. All this shows how much patience was needed to persuade apparently unwilling owners to yield. It is of course impossible to prove whether they were being deliberately obstructive or just very careful to have everything correctly drawn up. A map of the area shows that the Company needed this little piece of land at the south-eastern corner of the site in order to make the plot almost rectangular. Good drainage was vital and wells and a pump were very important in trying to keep the water level in the deep graves from becoming too much of a problem.

While all this was going on, simultaneously the Company and their lawyers were going through the lengthy procedure of gaining their Act of Parliament and also signing up the necessary shareholders to make the whole enterprise viable. They aimed to raise a capital of £20,000 in shares of £10 each – the same amount that was considered appropriate for the Victoria Park Cemetery, a third the size. However, a Report to the Directors by a Committee of Enquiry in March 1843 stated ‘Your Committee cannot...but think that the original Projectors of this Establishment were in error in anticipating the possibility of carrying out so beneficial and at the same time so productive an investment

⁵⁴⁷ General Bill, CTHC/2/19, pp. 57-9.

on so inadequate a capital.⁵⁴⁸ The same Report states that 1,613 shares had actually been taken up and that £14,629 10s. had been received, with £1,420 still to come in.

An indenture of 11th May 1841 sets out the aims of the ten founders:

making and establishing a Cemetery or Burial Ground in the parishes of St. Dunstan Stebonheath otherwise Stepney and St. Leonard Bromley in the county of Middlesex with all proper works and conveniences attached thereto or connected therewith to be called by the name of the City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery.⁵⁴⁹

The Chairman, John Hammack, a surveyor and timber merchant, lived in Tredegar Square, on the other side of Mile End Road, opposite the site of the cemetery. Two other founders also lived near the cemetery site, both described just as Esq. All the others gave addresses in the City of London; two were Aldermen. Among them were two wine merchants, a woollen draper, a pawnbroker and a shipowner. Six of the founders subscribed £500, three subscribed £250 and one £430. The list of shareholders shows that one third lived locally to the cemetery, one third in the City and the rest in various other parts of London, apart from one in Suffolk. The range of occupations of investors in the Company includes a plumber, a carpenter, a warehouseman and a gas fitter, as well as three undertakers and several of the tradesmen who had contracts to build the cemetery. Templar, Shearman and Slater took out shares, as did Wyatt and Brandon, the architects.⁵⁵⁰

As stated above, the purchase of the land and the signing up of shareholders went ahead at the same time as the application for an Act of Parliament. One of the Standing Orders of the House required that

in all Cemetery Bills a clause should be introduced requiring the consent in writing of every Owner Lessee and Occupier of every House of the annual value of £50 or having an ornamental pleasure ground occupied therewith within 300 yards of the Cemetery.⁵⁵¹

⁵⁴⁸ Report by a Committee of Enquiry appointed at an Extraordinary General Court of Proprietors holden on the 16th January 1843, CTHC/2/11, n.p.

⁵⁴⁹ Indenture 11th May 1841, CTHC/2/1.

⁵⁵⁰ Share certificates, O/495, London Metropolitan Archives, London.

⁵⁵¹ Parliamentary Bill, CTHC/2/17, p. 14.

One of the architects, Mr Brandon – who seems to have taken the lead in the design of the cemetery, as Mr Wyatt is hardly mentioned in the accounts – and Mr. Shearman met at the cemetery and spent the whole of September 30th defining the limits and trying to work out which premises were within 300 yards of the boundaries. At the beginning of November Mr Shearman was still measuring and trying to find out the names of owners. On 18th November Mr Shearman met Mr Brandon again because the limits the latter had marked out comprised ‘many Owners of Houses living very widely dispersed throughout the country’ and ‘made an appointment with him to remeasure the same in order if possible to dispense with some of them.’⁵⁵²

An interesting insight is given into the issue of property ownership in this part of London. Most of the houses with which the Company had to deal were inhabited by tenants and the owners did not necessarily live nearby. There was some urgency, as all signatures to what Mr Shearman called the consent list should be in by the end of December. Later sections of the Accounts describe journeys made by the lawyers (seven of them, judging by the proofs of witnesses that the Standing Order had been complied with) to collect signatures from owners living in Brighton, Colchester, Basingstoke, East Malling, Tonbridge Wells and Hastings. Someone was sent to cover the West Country and the Midlands, including a visit to Pontesbury, where the Rector of Bow lived. The only place they were excused from visiting, and from which service by post would be accepted, was Durham.

Quite a few of the Londoners refused to sign at once and the lawyers had to go back several times (each time charging their standard 6s 8d or 13s 4d). They were still chasing signatures in March, April, May and June 1841. Many reasons were given: Mr. Somes would not sign until he had it in writing ‘that a Bell should not be erected’; Mr Oliver ‘positively refused stating at the same time that nothing on Earth should make him

⁵⁵² Parliamentary Bill, CTHC/2/17, p. 5.

[sign] nor should any of his Tenants if he could stop them'; Mr Smith of the Mile End Road stated 'that he would not give his signature to consent until he was assured that the entrance would not be opposite his House' – Mr Wulff made the same objection and both were reassured by a letter from the Company Chairman. When he was asked to sign, Mr. Sequiera stated 'that he could not as his Wife stated she would leave their house if he did.'⁵⁵³ All attempts to persuade her failed. Eventually it was discovered that Mr. Sequiera was not actually qualified to sign anyway. These comments show how strongly some of the local community felt about the opening of a cemetery near their houses and how ready they were to make their objections known. There were worries over noise and perhaps an increase in traffic when funeral corteges arrived at the entrance. It could well be that all the publicity about health consequences of living near burial grounds, culminating in the publication of *Gatherings From Graveyards* in 1839,⁵⁵⁴ coloured reactions towards even what was proposed as being a well-managed and beautiful cemetery.

As well as doing all the legwork of collecting signatures, Mr Shearman was arranging for an MP to pilot the bill through the House of Commons. He was advised by the Agents to approach Mr. Clay, which he did in January 1841. After consulting the plans and reading an abstract of the bill, Clay agreed to steer the bill through the House of Commons. He presented the Petition to bring in a bill on 10th February. Mr. Shearman then

perused the General Cemetery Act the London Cemetery Act the South Metropolitan Cemetery Act the Brighton Cemetery Act the Shrewsbury Cemetery Act the Westminster Cemetery Act and the Acts 52 George 3rd cap 146, 6 and 7

⁵⁵³ Parliamentary Bill, CTHC/2/17, pp. 25, 29, 36, 38, 49.

⁵⁵⁴ George Alfred Walker, *Gatherings From Graveyards, Particularly Those of London, with a Concise History of the Modes of Interment Among Different Nations, from the Earliest Periods: and a Detail of Dangerous and Fatal Results Produced by the Unwise and Revolting Custom of Inhuming the Dead in the Midst of the Living* (London: Longmans, 1839). George Walker, philanthropist, surgeon and sanitary reformer, who lived near one of the most notorious of graveyards in Drury Lane, wrote extensively on the problem of overcrowded burial grounds. He was eventually given the nickname of 'Graveyard' Walker.

William 4th c.83 and 1st Victoria Cap 22 also the Commercial Railway Bill in order to select such provisions as would be most useful for the present Bill.

For this he charged five guineas. He then drafted the bill – 686 folio pages – for a fee of £68 12s 0d. He spent an ‘entire day’ with Counsel

going over the Bill when in consequence of Lord Shaftesbury having this session promulgated several model Bills which differed in many respects from those hitherto in use it was considered more judicious to revise and remodel the Draft in the outset rather than incur the chance of having to do so after the same printed.⁵⁵⁵

This took him seven days. In March the bill was sent to Hansard for printing. The Directors of the Company were driving things forward, because they were anxious that Parliament would be dissolved before they could get their Act and thus get the Cemetery open and earning revenue. The bill was presented for its first reading on 19th March.

Then the emphasis swung to negotiations with the Bishop of London, Charles Blomfield, about the fees which had to be given to the incumbent of the parish from which the deceased person had come. If parishioners were not buried in their local churchyard, many incumbents would have lost a large part of their income, for they were paid for every burial service they conducted. The Bishop fought very hard for his clergy. He told Shearman that he had ‘had some conversation with the Directors of the Highgate Cemetery who stated that if the Cemetery answered at all the Company could afford to pay higher fees than were provided by the Bill.’⁵⁵⁶ He wanted 10s per interment, which he claimed was what was given by the Brompton Cemetery. Off went the lawyers to collect information about burial fees in churches all over Tower Hamlets and also at the East London Cemetery in order to persuade the Bishop to lower his expectations. Numerous Tables of Fees were prepared – fifteen sheets of them – to be sent to the Bishop.

The second reading of the bill was scheduled for 21st April, but the House was adjourned because there were fewer than forty members in the Chamber. They tried again the following day, when Mr. Clay was not present, but managed to find someone else to

⁵⁵⁵ Parliamentary Bill, CTHC/2/17, p. 20.

⁵⁵⁶ Parliamentary Bill, CTHC/2/17, p. 23.

move it on his behalf. At some point a copy of the bill had been sent to Lord Shaftesbury for his comments, but when enquiry was made why nothing had been heard from him, it was found that he had mislaid the copy and asked for another one, which was supplied.⁵⁵⁷ By May 1st his amendments had been received and were under consideration.⁵⁵⁸

The next step was to get the bill through its Committee Stage. The directors and the parliamentary agents decided not to postpone it, although the Bishop of London had still not given his approval. Once a day had been fixed, the lawyers went round to the houses of all the members who had been selected for the committee and left a note reminding them of the date and asking them to be sure to attend on Monday.⁵⁵⁹ Most of the clauses of the bill were passed, but the committee postponed the discussion of the clause about clergy fees to the following Thursday in the hope that the matter could be agreed with the Bishop of London meanwhile. The committee assembled only to adjourn until the following Tuesday. On 24th May, Shearman wrote to all the members reminding them to attend the committee meeting the following day. He also went to see the Bishop of London, who had alterations to suggest to certain clauses of the bill. These had to be drafted and a fair copy made by the following day, when it was taken round for the Bishop to sign before the committee meeting. Finally Shearman went to the House of Commons for the committee meeting at 3 p.m., only to find that there were not enough selected members present. He had to track them down in various parts of the House in order to get them into the committee room. The bill was approved and moved on to its report stage.⁵⁶⁰ Again, when the day arrived there were too few members in the chamber and the House was adjourned. On May 28th it passed the report stage without opposition and proceeded on to its third reading, which it passed on 2nd June. It then moved on to the House of Lords.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid., CTHC/2/17, p. 28.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid., CTHC/2/17, p. 30.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid., CTHC/2/17, p. 38.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid., CTHC/2/17, p. 46.

All the time the bill was moving slowly through the House of Commons, the lawyers had been pursuing the last signatures on the Consent List and also getting signatures on the Subscription List of shareholders. Both these documents had to be ready to accompany the bill into the House of Lords, together with proofs that notices had been served on the local churches and to the owners, lessees and occupiers. Mr. Ford, Surveyor of Mile End, and his clerk had to attend as witnesses that the 300 yards had been correctly measured. Three lawyers – named as Mr Shearman, Mr. Slater and Mr. Gray – and four clerks also had to attend as witnesses about the actual serving of the notices.⁵⁶¹

On 8th of June they all attended at the House of Lords to appear before the committee. They waited there from 3 till 7 but – inevitably it must have seemed – the committee was adjourned and they were not called. They attended again the following day and gave their evidence. The lawyers applied for the 300 yard clause to be struck out and this was agreed to. The clause was quickly redrafted and approved by Lord Shaftesbury, but it had to go before the committee again at 3 p.m. on 10th June. Shearman set off for Mile End to collect Mr. Ford and his clerk, only to find they had gone to West Ham. He followed them there and got them to the House of Lords in time to appear.⁵⁶²

From then on all went smoothly. The bill passed its report stage and third reading in the House of Lords, went back to the House of Commons where the Lords amendments were accepted. The bill then went back to the Lords to receive the Royal Assent.

Almost the final entry in the Parliamentary Bill reads

[t]o almost daily indefatigable personal attention and attendance of ourselves and several Clerks extra during a period of upwards of 7 months with great trouble and anxiety in consequence of the general daily apprehension of a dissolution of Parliament and in consequence of the urgent desire of the Directors that no time or trouble should be spared and whereby the object in view was ultimately obtained and a most obnoxious clause expunged which would otherwise have been destructive to the Company's operations. £52 10s 0d⁵⁶³

The whole Parliamentary Bill came to £2,235 18s 1d.

⁵⁶¹ Ibid., CTHC/2/17, pp. 54-55.

⁵⁶² Ibid., CTHC/2/17, p. 57.

⁵⁶³ Ibid., CTHC/2/17, p. 58.

On 4th September 1841, the Bishop consecrated the Anglican part of the cemetery, after which, according to the *Morning Advertiser*, ‘the company assembled adjourned to a marquee for a cold collation.’ The Bishop gave a speech, which the newspaper reported in great detail. In the course of it, the Bishop said that ‘he greatly approved of public cemeteries in the suburbs of large towns, both on the ground of the health of the inhabitants, and on that of public decency.’ He then took some time to set out his position as regards payment to clergy who would lose income by losing burial fees, but complimented the directors on their agreement to pay some fees ‘though the remuneration was not all that could be wished.’ He left soon afterwards. The *Morning Advertiser* reported that the cemetery ‘promises, when finished, to be very tastefully laid out.’⁵⁶⁴ The first burial took place on the same afternoon.

A detailed account of the process of acquiring the advantage of consecration has been included in this thesis because it gives an important insight into the procedures for obtaining a Private Act in the 1840s and also shows how much the local community had to be involved when a development as controversial as a cemetery was proposed. It demonstrates how important was the need for patience and persistence on the part of the founders. The directors of the new cemetery were ready to spend a large amount of money to make their enterprise appeal to more than the poor of the neighbourhood. Had the promoters of the City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery Company given up in the face of the difficulties, one of the largest open spaces in the East End might have been lost to housebuilding or more factories, such as were beginning to appear near Bow Common.

The Cemetery, appearance and use

While all the anxiety of the acquiring of the land and the Act of Parliament had been going on, the directors could not forget the work that had to be done to prepare the cemetery. Long before everything had been finalised, contracts had been negotiated (in

⁵⁶⁴ *Morning Advertiser*, 6 Sept 1841, n.p.

October, November and December 1840) with Mr Druitt for masons' work and bricklaying, Mr Livermore for surface drainage and roads, Skitteral and Wolfe for an artesian well, Bramah and Woolf for a pumping engine.⁵⁶⁵ Accounts included in the Report of 1843 show that they spent £1,834 11s 7d on bricks for the boundary walls and the drains. Mr Steadman was paid £774 2s 2d for iron railings and gates and the painting of them. A further £100 went to Mr Smith, also for painting the ironwork.⁵⁶⁶

Of the roughly £24,000 spent on the land and preparation of the cemetery, only £299 5s 6d was spent on 'Plantations', of which £197 went to a Mr. Ross, presumably for the sale of plants. A sum such as this suggests that the Company was not placing a great importance on horticulture in the cemetery. Even with a comparable acreage to that at Abney Park, there was no ambition to make any such special feature as an arboretum. Unfortunately, as Hugh Meller states, a twentieth century arson attack resulted in the burning of the early records of the setting up of Abney Park Cemetery during an attack on the Lodge there,⁵⁶⁷ so it is not possible to make a direct comparison between the expenditure in the two cemeteries. As City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery was being created out of grassland, there were probably no established trees to act as a framework. An item in the General Bill for Nov 17th 1840 shows that some work must have started by that date, for Mr Shearman had a meeting with Mr Anderson – probably James Anderson, Gardener of Regent Street,⁵⁶⁸ listed as a shareholder –

on the subject of Mr Ross having removed upwards of £9 worth of Shrubs bought at his Sale in such a manner as to render them worthless advising on the circumstances which led to it and instructing him to make a minute detail of them in writing.⁵⁶⁹

⁵⁶⁵ General Bill, CTHC/2/19, pp. 28-30.

⁵⁶⁶ Report by a Committee of Enquiry Appointed at an Extraordinary General Court of Proprietors Holden on the 16th January 1843 to Investigate and Report Upon the General State of the Company's Affairs, CTHC/2/11, n.p.

⁵⁶⁷ Hugh Meller, *London Cemeteries: An Illustrated Guide and Gazetteer* (Amersham: Avebury Publishing Company, 1981) p. 61.

⁵⁶⁸ This is unlikely to be the West End Regent Street, but a street in the neighbourhood of the Regent's Canal.

⁵⁶⁹ General Bill, CTHC/2/19, p. 28.

A letter was written to Mr Ross, requiring compensation. The Report of 1843 details, among the officers and servants of the company, four labourers, who are described as 'Excavator and Gardeners'. William Sell is paid one guinea a week. William Sell junior is paid 18s a week 'when constantly employed', as are Thomas Sell and Richard Lawless. Benjamin Sell, 'Boy for Mill house', is paid 2s 6d a week.⁵⁷⁰ In June 1844, another name occurs as a gardener in the cemetery – Thomas Long. He was called as a witness in a murder trial, testifying that at about half-past 12 on 8th June he was approached by the prisoner who was enquiring about purchasing a 'a piece of ground to bury.' The man wanted a brick grave and Thomas Long told him 'he should give four clear days to get a brick grave ready.'⁵⁷¹ It seems that Long knew all about preparing graves as well as gardening. If he and the other men had to dig the graves as well as maintain 32 acres of landscape, it would be asking a great deal of them to approach any very high standard of gardening and is a further suggestion that horticulture played a much less prominent part than in Abney Park Cemetery, who had at least seven men for a similar acreage. An even more dramatic contrast is with Highgate Cemetery, only five acres larger, which, by 1906, had 28 gardeners and a 'a maze of beds and glass-houses' in which 'some 250,000 to 300,000 plants are raised every year.'⁵⁷²

Just as the survival of the Bills enable one to follow the setting up of the cemetery, a beautiful coloured lithograph, in the collection of the London Metropolitan Archive,⁵⁷³ (which it dates to c.1860), gives a view of the cemetery at that date – though rather a fanciful one – no doubt the directors were anxious to give the best possible impression in order to promote the enterprise. It shows a funeral with three mourning carriages arriving along a wide roadway at the Gothic style main gate, which is flanked by trees. Half hidden in the trees is a quite large house – possibly the lodge. The flat land beyond has some

⁵⁷⁰ Report by a Committee of Enquiry, CTHC/2/11, n.p.

⁵⁷¹ *The Times*, 20 June 1844, p. 7.

⁵⁷² T.W. Wilkinson, 'Burying London', in *Living London*, Vol. III, p. 83.

⁵⁷³ Collage No: 22347, London Metropolitan Archives. The lithograph is used as the frontispiece to this chapter, p. 137.

indication of tree and shrub planting also. However, the area around the cemetery was much more built up than this image suggests. There is no indication as to the purpose of making the lithograph, but it is likely that it was intended to promote the cemetery in some way. It is supposed to show the view from the Mile End Road looking south towards the Thames. A map of 1854 clearly shows that the north side of the cemetery was overlooked by the huge City of London Workhouse, several small roads of houses and the Merchant Seamen's Almshouses.⁵⁷⁴ To the South was the Blackwall Extension Railway, which ran very close to the cemetery. A description written twenty years later, by Richard Rowe, 'Good Works Commissioner', reinforces this impression. Although the cemetery concerned is not named, it corresponds exactly with the location of the City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery, since, as well as the description quoted below, it mentions what is obviously Bow Common, with factories which 'pollute the air with stench only comparable to the combined malodours of a main-sewer's outfall and a score or two of neighbouring chimneys on fire at once' and four huge gasometers.

In the East End there is a cemetery bounded, as the geography books say, on the north by a work-house, by more masonry and brick and mortar on the east and west, and by a railway on the south. Trains are always panting or screaming past it – the shadows of their trucks, vans, carriages, engines and smoke and vapour flitting silently over the green mounds. The cemetery is so near to the line that conversations take place between workmen lounging on the viaduct-parapet and any acquaintances they may have discovered wandering among the tombs. Traffic rumbles, hammers rattle around the graves. The grass between them bristles with requests to visitors not to walk upon it, and notifications that five pounds is the fine for plucking flowers; while the walls are speckled with handbills announcing that some flower-plucker, who had not five pounds, has got seven days.⁵⁷⁵

This description suggests that the atmosphere in the City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery was quite different from that of quiet contemplation to which Abney Park Cemetery aspired and which the lithograph represented. However, despite the noise, Rowe goes on to describe watching a robin flitting from tomb to tomb, yellow leaves

⁵⁷⁴ *Davies new map of London: showing the railway stations and all modern improvements* (London: A. Newbury, 1854), BL.I/1854, Institute for Historical Research, London.

⁵⁷⁵ Richard Rowe, *Picked Up In The Streets or Struggles for Life Amongst the London Poor* (London: W.H. Allen, 1880) p. 65.

falling slowly, and ‘the holly-hocks and dahlias and nasturtiums clustered round the little lodge.’⁵⁷⁶ (Not the large house in the lithograph). He watched pale-faced children planting shrubs on the graves. He describes an attempt to personalise even the poorest graves – ‘at the head of one little grave stood a roughly home-made glazed black frame, containing the cheap photograph of an ugly little boy, and his written epitaph, with this for its motto: “A mother’s fondest care on earth/Is gone to share an angel’s birth.” He had not been ugly in *her* eyes.’⁵⁷⁷ It is not clear whether this is a private grave or an attempt to personalise an interment in a common grave, but as Julie-Marie Strange writes ‘between the ideal of the private grave and the shame of pauper burial, there was considerable scope for the individual to inscribe mourning rites, no matter how rudimentary, with profound meaning.’⁵⁷⁸

An earlier glimpse of the cemetery appears in July 1859, when a 71-year-old widow was charged with stealing four flowers planted on a grave. The magistrate was obviously annoyed that the Secretary and Chaplain of the Cemetery, the Reverend David Shaboe, had brought the charge in the first place. “How many flowers did she take?” “She plucked three roses and a geranium from the grave...and put them in her basket.” Mr Selfe, the magistrate, said that he ‘thought it was a strong measure to lock up a poor old woman all night for plucking a flower. “Four flowers, Sir.” “It is all very well to look after the cemetery and the flowers, but I don’t like the course adopted of locking up this poor widow all night...Upon second thoughts you must be aware you have acted harshly.” “These cases are so numerous.”...“It was a cruel proceeding. The prisoner is discharged.”’⁵⁷⁹ Unlike Victoria Park, where acts of vandalism against the plants were very few, Rev. Shaboe said that ‘these cases are so numerous’. Flowers in graveyards had been placed there by people of the neighbourhood and those in the park by the authorities

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 65.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 67.

⁵⁷⁸ Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870-1914*, p. 155.

⁵⁷⁹ *The Times*, 30 July 1859, p. 12.

and it is perhaps surprising that more respect was not paid to offerings to the dead left by local people. There were, of course, the park keepers and park constables on duty in Victoria Park to prevent any such thefts, but it seems to have been an ongoing problem for this cemetery, as shown by the profusion of notices mentioned by Richard Rowe.

However, the major problem for proprietors and shareholders of private cemeteries was that there was a finite number of people who could be buried in the available space and therefore income would diminish and the profit to be made would inevitably come to an end. Even if in the early days of a cemetery a strict standard was maintained as regarded the space between graves and the number of coffins that could be placed in one grave, as time passed even a cemetery with the aspirations of Abney Park allowed graves to encroach on areas which had originally been designed as paths. Aesthetics had to give way to the realities of commerce.

Aspirations at Tower Hamlets were not so high as at Abney Park. From the beginning, writes James Stevens Curl, the Directors consciously decided 'to maximise its financial potential by adopting a policy of high-density burial'.⁵⁸⁰ They had after all invested a huge sum in creating the cemetery and needed to bring in a substantial revenue. This meant digging pit graves. A Mr. Holland visited the City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery on 3rd March 1856 and wrote a brief Report on it for the Secretary of State for the Home Department.⁵⁸¹

Many coffins were placed in one grave; several side by side, and layer upon layer, without any intervening earth, or at most only just enough to cover them. While I stayed, I saw five coffins put into one grave, and it was left open for the reception of more.

⁵⁸⁰ Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death*, p. 109.

⁵⁸¹ Mr. Holland had already visited Victoria Park Cemetery the year before having heard 'that very objectionable practices attending burials were permitted [there]'. He decided to make the visit 'while visiting friends in the neighbourhood' and said that he 'did not consider my visit an official one' which suggests that he had not been sent there to make a report. He merely wrote a letter to an M.P. in the Home Office, proposing that action should be taken. He was later asked to go to other cemeteries and report on their condition. *Cemeteries (Metropolis) Copies of Reports Parliamentary Papers*, 1856 vol. lii.146, p. 3.

He made enquiries and found that the directors had recently decided to do away with pit-burials of this kind, and that

in common interments there shall be one coffin buried at once in each grave, the others placed above, separated by layers of soil, not less than a foot thick; the highest coffin will be four feet below the surface, and that will be covered with growing vegetation.⁵⁸²

These graves were, of course, intended for the poorest, often being used for parish burials.⁵⁸³ The same system was used in Victoria Park Cemetery and even in Abney Park. Mr. Holland also visited Victoria Park Cemetery to report to the Secretary of State and met with Charles Salisbury Butler, chief proprietor of the Cemetery, who promised to make improvements in burial arrangements very similar to those in Tower Hamlets. Dr. Sutherland visited Abney Park on the same mission, and reported that indeed it did carry out pit-burials, but ‘the surface is tolerably well kept, but underneath it is a mass of corruption in the used part.’ He saw a common grave, 17 feet deep, which one of the gravediggers was having to bail out with a bucket, there was so much water running into the bottom of it. ‘This grave, it was stated, would hold seven adult coffins.’⁵⁸⁴ There was no doubt some thought about the appearance of these cemeteries, but the major concern was the dangers to health brought about by overfilled, shallow graves.

Although it was Victoria Park Cemetery that earned the reputation for being the worst of the East End private cemeteries, the City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery was in many ways just as, if not more, unattractive. Perhaps the fact that the latter was so much bigger gave the impression, at least at the beginning, of spaciousness. There was room for two chapels, one Episcopal and one Dissenting. The insurance certificate issued by the Sun Fire Office for 1847-8 put the value of the Episcopal Chapel with all its furnishings at £900 and that of the Dissenters at £500. The chaplain to the Cemetery

⁵⁸² Ibid., p. 5.

⁵⁸³ A very vivid account of such a parish burial can be found in *Mysteries of Modern London* by One of the Crowd (London: Diprose & Bateman, 1883), pp. 71-76. The cemetery is not named, but is said to be ‘in the suburbs’.

⁵⁸⁴ Cemeteries (Metropolis) Copies of Reports *Parliamentary Papers*, 1856 vol. lii.146, p. 2.

Company was paid £60 a year, and wrote to the Bishop of London in July 1849 to protest that this was far too low for the number of interments he was expected to officiate at – twenty-five a week on average.⁵⁸⁵ The Secretary of the Company, W.S. Dowding, also wrote to the Bishop that year – to protest that

the connexion of the Rev. J. Williams with the Cemetery, as chaplain, must prevent its holding that high place in the public estimation which it otherwise would have...During the last three years the Rev. J. Williams has been absent, without authority from the Directors, three separate periods [which he then details]. The Directors have every reason to believe that during the greater portion of each of the before mentioned absences the Rev. J. Williams has been confined in a debtors prison.⁵⁸⁶

Seven years later, it was Mr. Dowding himself who was in prison, convicted of embezzling money from the Cemetery Company. Abney Park also had trouble with its chaplain, and its superintendent was also found guilty of embezzlement – though he was merely dismissed, not prosecuted. Dowding was accused of stealing £400, which was as nothing compared to the £18,179 3s 2d that Edward Buxton managed to acquire by defrauding the London Cemetery Company, of which he was secretary, over eighteen years.⁵⁸⁷

By 1884, after forty years of interments, matters had become very serious. The cemetery was virtually full, the neighbourhood had become increasingly built up and there was less interest in keeping the cemetery in good condition. In that year, Mrs. Basil Holmes, of the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association, began to survey disused burial grounds in the East End of London. Ten years later, in 1894, she made a complete survey of all burial grounds and cemeteries in London for the London County Council, and in 1896 she published a book which included her findings. She described City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery in her book, and it is not clear whether she is alluding to 1894 or to a visit ten years earlier, but it seems probable that it is to the later period. ‘Most of the

⁵⁸⁵ Mrs. Basil Holmes stated that by 1889, 247,000 bodies had been interred there. Holmes, *The London Burial Grounds*, p. 303.

⁵⁸⁶ Letter from W.S. Dowding to the Bishop of London, 10 Dec 1849, CTHC/2/13.

⁵⁸⁷ Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death*, p. 94.

graves, except those at the edge of the walks, look utterly neglected, and parts of the ground are very untidy. It is situated in a densely populated district.'⁵⁸⁸ She also thought it probably the dampest cemetery in London.

The City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery was as large as Abney Park Cemetery but it lacked the advantages of the latter's location and perhaps its garden-style appeal. James Stevens Curl suggests that '[o]ne has the impression...that there was little effort to make the place smart enough to appeal to the wealthier classes: Tower Hamlets seems to have been a working-class cemetery from the start.'⁵⁸⁹ However, even if idealised, the lithograph of 1860 does show that efforts had been made to plant out the grounds in an appropriate way. Curl admits that the cemetery has 'a pretty castellated Gothic gateway and lodge and two Gothic Chapels with arcaded wings.'⁵⁹⁰ John Claudius Loudon praised 'the very good single lodge at the west entrance' in his *On The Laying Out of Cemeteries*,⁵⁹¹ but made no comment on the grounds. Only two years after the cemetery opened, the plantings would not have attained the maturity shown in the lithograph and were not worth the much greater attention he gave to Abney Park. But the promising beginning was not to be maintained. Although surviving monuments show that some people could afford quite elaborate tombs, the fact that, as James Stevens Curl suggests, this was predominantly a working class cemetery meant that the income did not justify a major outlay on landscaping and maintenance. People may have made an effort themselves to beautify their own family plots, as they did in Victoria Park Cemetery, but the Directors do not seem to have made much attempt to keep up the standards of the place as a whole. For them, the balance between profits and aesthetics clearly tipped in favour of profits.

⁵⁸⁸ Holmes, *The London Burial Grounds*, p. 303.

⁵⁸⁹ Curl, *The Victorian Way of Death*, p. 111.

⁵⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁵⁹¹ Loudon, *On the Laying Out, Planting, and Managing of Cemeteries*, p. 19.

Victoria Park Cemetery

Victoria Park Cemetery, although also a joint stock company, was the closest in many ways to the old private burial grounds. It was only nine and a half acres in extent – therefore about a third the size of Abney Park or Tower Hamlets Cemetery – and the land belonged to one man. Given its size it is not surprising that it had the shortest active ‘life’ of all three cemeteries discussed in this chapter. Its eventual transformation into a small park was to be one of the most important projects of the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association and will be fully considered in the following chapter.

The Cemetery Company was incorporated in 1845. According to Lieut.-Col. Sexby, writing in 1898, the land had been purchased in about 1840 by the local M.P., Charles Salisbury Butler, for building purposes. It lay just to the south of Victoria Park itself, and perhaps Butler had hoped that the opening of a splendid new park would make houses in the neighbourhood a profitable speculation. But before any building was begun,

a company offered to purchase the ground for the purposes of a cemetery. The purchase-money was to be paid by annual instalments, and the company was duly incorporated about 1845 and took over the land from Mr. Butler. But as the annual payments were not forthcoming, Mr. Butler was compelled to resume possession in 1853.⁵⁹²

Lieut.-Col. Sexby seems to be suggesting that Butler had nothing to do with the formation of the cemetery company. However, when, in February 1845, the registration document of the joint stock company was lodged with the Board of Trade,⁵⁹³ Charles Salisbury Butler has signed as one of the promoters, and in the return of provisional directors of the company, lodged on 21st February, his name and signature also appears, as it does on the prospectus which was issued to potential shareholders. But an indenture of April 1845 shows that an agreement to purchase was entered into by five men, three of whom were his fellow provisional directors. It may be that he withdrew at a very early

⁵⁹² Sexby, *The Municipal Parks, Gardens, and Open Spaces of London*, p. 571.

⁵⁹³ Victoria Park Cemetery Company: Joint Stock Company Registration, lodged 1 Feb 1845. BT 41/727/3911, National Archives, Kew.

stage from the actual management of the project – he is not listed among the shareholders of the company in 1848. But he received at least four payments up to 1852. This does not suggest that Mr. Butler was ‘compelled to resume possession’ merely because he had not been paid any of the annual instalments. In 1856, he is described as ‘the chief proprietor’ of the cemetery, which is said to be situated ‘amidst his own property, and his own tenants would be the first to suffer from any injury arising from it.’⁵⁹⁴

When the Victoria Park Cemetery Company was formed, in 1845, it seems as if the directors had the best of intentions. The prospectus they issued quoted extensively from *Gatherings From Graveyards* to illustrate the horrors that had gone before. In contrast, according to the prospectus, the new cemetery would ‘be ornamentally and substantially laid out, well defended by high fence walls, and properly guarded by day and night.’⁵⁹⁵ In addition to a wish to show respect to the dead by interring them in pleasant surroundings, there was another reason for creating an enclosed garden space for burial, there was among mourners a vivid memory of the depredations of the bodysnatchers – and although by the passing of the Anatomy Act in 1832 (making bodies of unclaimed paupers who died in the workhouse available for dissection) this was no longer the threat it had once been, there was still a preference for a safely walled space. The City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery was similarly walled. The directors were, according to the prospectus, ‘in communication with the Bishop of the diocese for the purpose of having the cemetery consecrated’ (though in fact it never was). They aimed to raise a capital of £20,000 in two thousand shares of £10 each and stated that as well as ‘the promises of energetic support given by many highly influential local residents in the district’ there had been ‘numerous applications for shares, even before the prospectus is submitted to the public.’⁵⁹⁶

⁵⁹⁴ Cemeteries (Metropolis) Copies of Reports *Parliamentary Papers* 1856, vol. lii.146, p.4

⁵⁹⁵ Prospectus of the Victoria Park Cemetery Company, p. 2. BT 41/727/3911, National Archives, Kew

⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

A list of shareholders made in November 1845 shows that indeed almost all of them were local. Most of them were of a much lower rank of society than those who took shares in the City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery Company, ranging from James Borrett, a butcher in Brick Lane, and Douglas Robertson, a baker in Cambridge Heath Road, who bought two shares each, and John Clitheroe, an artist in fireworks in Weaver Street, Bethnal Green, who bought three, to a 'gentleman', John Butler of Hackney, who bought fifty. A local plasterer bought five, a local limeburner six, a local carman five. Joseph Dyke, a victualler in the Mile End Road, bought forty, in two lots; a house agent in Bethnal Green bought thirty. Only two women appear on the list, Elizabeth Curling, a lace cleaner, who bought ten shares, and Jemima Mowl, a widow, from Bethnal Green, who bought three. All these people would have had to pay 10s. down per share, and undertake to pay the rest of the money when called upon to do so. In return, in addition to an annual dividend, they were offered certain privileges: the owner of two shares was guaranteed the right of nomination 'to one interment in the ground, to be called the Proprietors' ground; a plot which will be reserved and maintained with flowers, etc (without charge,) in perpetuity.' Those holding ten shares would have a family grave for four persons; those with twenty, 'the like for eight' and those with forty 'a vault for twelve coffins (nine feet by six feet six inches)'.⁵⁹⁷ The shareholders' list, however, shows that at that time only 564 shares had been taken up. Unfortunately, this is the only list in the archive, so it is not possible to say whether the company ever achieved its target of two thousand.

The first set of annual accounts shows that by July 1845 work on the site had begun. Iron gates had been bought, the bricklayer was building the walls round the cemetery and the archway entrance was started. In October a first payment was made for building the chapel. In the same month a sum of £2 9s 3d was noted for the hire of a coach

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 2.

‘for Directors to view other cemeteries with a view of making improvements thereon.’⁵⁹⁸

They advertised – in the *Times* – for a ‘Foreman, an active man to supervise the workmen in laying out and planting the Victoria-park cemetery.’⁵⁹⁹ In December, £5 3s 9d was spent on turf, and in February 1846, £40 on shrubs. Wheelbarrows were bought, and an iron roller (though, of course, the wheelbarrows may have been for the building works rather than purely for horticultural purposes). The first funeral was on 11th March 1846, and by the end of the accounting period, there had been another eleven, bringing in a total of £4 10s. 6d. In 1846, another £74 3s 2d was paid for shrubs and £6 2s 0d for turf; in 1847, £16 0s 8d went on grass seed and shrubs and in 1848 a mere £2 15s 4d on ‘seeds etc’.⁶⁰⁰ The turf and grass seeds were productive, for in 1849, sale of hay brought in £14 16s 6d; in 1850, sale of grass, £13 5s. 0d and in 1851 – the last year for which accounts are held in the National Archives – the sale of grass brought in £15 0s. 0d.

The prospectus had stated that the cemetery would be located in a populous district, where annual deaths would amount to 20,000. It continued ‘If this Company receives no larger proportion than one-twentieth of the number of interments occurring in the Eastern district, the annual income of the Company will exceed £5,000 per annum.’⁶⁰¹ This was wildly optimistic, as the accounts show that in the first five years the annual sum received never reached £500, let alone £5,000, however many interments there were. By January 1865 the cost of an adult burial was 19s 6d, that of a child under ten 9s. 6d. In May of that year, the fees rose to 9s. 6d. for a child under three, 12s. 6d. for a child between the age of three and ten, and £1 2s. 6d. for anyone over the age of ten.⁶⁰² There is no way that their estimate of approximately one thousand burials a year could achieve a sum of £5000, even

⁵⁹⁸ Victoria Park Cemetery Company Annual Accounts, 6 Feb 1845 to 7 April 1846, BT 41/727/3911, National Archives, Kew.

⁵⁹⁹ *The Times*, 13 October 1845, p. 2.

⁶⁰⁰ Victoria Park Cemetery Company Annual Accounts, 1848 to 1849, BT 41/727/3911.

⁶⁰¹ Victoria Park Cemetery Company Prospectus, p.2, BT 41/427/3911.

⁶⁰² Advertisement in the *Bethnal Green Times*, 14 Jan 1865; *ibid.*, 13 May 1865. n.p.

had they charged similar fees to Abney Park or City of London and Tower Hamlets, where an adult burial in a common grave cost £1. 10s and £1. 5s respectively.

Perhaps another sign that not all was going to plan was that in April 1850 the cemetery received its first corpse from the Millbank Penitentiary, followed by eight more that year. From then on, the Penitentiary sent all its dead inmates either to Victoria Park Cemetery or to the School of Anatomy. In 1854, 52 inmates died – there had been an outbreak of cholera – and 44 of them were buried in the cemetery, including 28 cholera victims. Ten were buried on one day, 12th August. The records end in May 1863, but up to that date 139 Millbank inmates had been buried in Victoria Park Cemetery.⁶⁰³ The Directors of Abney Park Cemetery, on the other hand, after receiving a letter from the Vestry Clerk of Camberwell ‘requesting to know on what terms the Company would bury their paupers and artisans’ resolved in 1853 that ‘a letter be written...respectfully declining to enter into any contract for the burial of their paupers and that the Secretary be authorised to return a similar reply to any other applications of a like nature.’⁶⁰⁴ It is clear that at this date the two cemeteries were catering for a different class of burial.

Whether or not the ‘highly influential local residents’ that the prospectus had boasted of took up their guaranteed plots or not, it seems that there were plenty of others who were happy to take advantage of the place. Two contrasting accounts certainly show that it was well used. In 1856, only eleven years after the cemetery opened, *The Times* quoted from reports made to the Home Office by Dr. Sutherland and Mr. Holland on the state of certain metropolitan cemeteries. Mr. Holland visited Victoria Park Cemetery one Sunday afternoon in November 1855. He saw ‘30 or 40 coffins thrust into graves, and all were left uncovered while he stayed; the graves were very near each other, and the bustle was continuous and distressing’. He also commented of one corner of the cemetery that

⁶⁰³ Register of Deaths, Millbank. P COM 2/165, National Archives, Kew.

⁶⁰⁴ Directors’ Minute Book, 1850-1861, 16 Dec 1853 D/B/ABN/1/4, Hackney Archives, London.

there is in this quarter of the cemetery one mass of putrefying corruption, consisting of several thousand carcasses, contained in coffins immediately contiguous in the same graves, and separated from those in adjoining graves by a few inches of soil only, which are heaped up on each other partly below, partly above the natural level of the ground, and covered only by a few feet of open gravel.⁶⁰⁵

These details led *The Times* to call the cemetery ‘this loathsome place’ and write of its ‘revolting practices.’⁶⁰⁶ In 1859, it returned to the subject, saying that it had ‘already been stigmatized by official reports to Parliament as the scene of some very unseemly proceedings in connexion with the interment of corpses and the disgracefully overcrowded state of the cemetery.’⁶⁰⁷ The high ideals of the proprietors as expressed in their prospectus twenty years before had not survived the need for making an annual profit.

Yet, only a year later, a reporter from *The Builder* received a somewhat different impression, despite the grim statistics and the admittedly off-putting setting, where

the dull tolling of the chapel bell, the noise of manufactories, the lowing of oxen and bleating of sheep, with sounds peculiar to the railway, which is nearly adjoining – cause feelings so mingled they cannot be well expressed.

He admits that a visit to the cemetery ‘on a busy burying-day’ can be

a peculiar and painful sight...two, or perhaps three, clergymen are, in different parts, intoning the solemn service for the dead...at one grave Irish mourners are sounding their peculiar dirge over their departed friend: in other places women and children are kneeling on the yellow mounds of earth.⁶⁰⁸

But his report suggests that not all funerals were poverty-stricken. ‘Funerals ambitiously performed, with mutes and feather-men; and others in different descriptions of mourning carriages, pass on: some, in cabs, roll along the broad central avenue.’ The reporter describes the graves of children ‘of the poorer classes’, each pit 10 feet 6 inches deep, 6 feet long and 2 feet 8 inches wide, containing up to twenty bodies, in layers

[t]he long rows of these sepulchres, disposed with geometrical exactness, and numbering to three or four thousand and upwards, give one some notion of the vast

⁶⁰⁵ *Cemeteries (Metropolitan)*, p. 3.

⁶⁰⁶ *The Times*, 21 April 1856, p. 7.

⁶⁰⁷ *The Times*, 23 Feb 1859, p. 5.

⁶⁰⁸ *The Builder*, 1 Sept 1860, p. 558.

number of little children who have there found their last rest. Nor can this be wondered at, when we are told that on some days a hundred bodies are buried.⁶⁰⁹

He had thought that in all cases where many bodies were buried in a mass grave, there would be no question of any memorials being placed for individuals, and yet in Victoria Park Cemetery this was not the case.

On most of those which have been banked up, there is a curious variety of ornament. On many are large shells, on some of which are inscriptions...close by is a little plaster cast of the Virgin and Child...there are also chimney-piece ornaments of various value, which had probably been familiar play-things with a poor child who sleeps below. There are little toys, too, mugs with names on them, china figures, dolls, little china basins and vases, in which flowers are sown or planted. On some graves are little wooden memorials, with epitaphs painted in white and black on clouds or rays. On nearly all attempts are made to cultivate flowers.⁶¹⁰

These very personal mementoes helped relatives find a particular grave – touchingly, ‘a man and his wife had found “little Charley’s glass peacock, which his aunt had given him”, and were sowing flower seeds close by.’ Although obviously many of the visitors preferred to plant their own seeds, the writer says that ‘for a certain money consideration the graves can be turfed and edged with wickerwork.’ The writer suggests that this unusual method of decorating the graves, ‘not to be met with in other metropolitan cemeteries,’⁶¹¹ can be put down to the fact that so many of the inhabitants of Bethnal Green and Spitalfields were the descendants of Huguenot weavers and still observed French traditions. However, even if items such as Charlie’s glass peacock were unusual, the use of flowers and plants on a grave were not. In all three cemeteries discussed, visitors always mention the flowers that mourners have left. Francis, Kellaher and Neophytou point out the importance of flowers on a grave:

[f]lowers have symbolic meaning in practices surrounding death and mourning because they symbolize the human life course...For mourners, gardens and the cultivation of flowers are often sources of personal and aesthetic satisfaction.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 558.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid., p. 558.

⁶¹¹ Ibid., p. 558.

Attending to plants...provides an opportunity for contemplative connection with the self and with nature and is often healing and restorative.⁶¹²

The conflicting views of Victoria Park Cemetery given by the reporters from *The Times* and *The Builder* illustrates very clearly how careful one must be not to accept too unquestioningly historical accounts of the horrors of the nineteenth-century East End. While it is of course understandable – and correct – that medical and sanitary officers should fear the ill-effects of mass graves and overcrowded burial-grounds, they ignore totally the efforts made by the relatives of the dead to beautify their last resting place. As Patrick Joyce suggests, the fact that the burial site had been purchased meant ‘that the site of interment became also the property of the living...the fact of ownership going on for ever. Memory could thereby also become eternal.’⁶¹³ He also points out the overlap of private and public in the cemetery. The owners of the graves could plant their own flowers in the middle of a space which was maintained to a greater or lesser extent by the owners of the cemetery.

Another account describing an unidentified ‘metropolitan cemetery’ is equally evocative:

[i]n those parts of the great metropolitan cemeteries in which the poor are laid to rest...there are no ‘storied urns or animated busts’ to tell who sleeps below, or help to make the place of burial in any degree a show place. These parts generally lie well back from the trim walks, and, viewed from a distance, and by contrast with the ‘first class ground’ with its bravery of monumental masonry and gilden inscription, they present a somewhat desolate and neglected appearance.⁶¹⁴ But a nearer inspection will show that the poor are not careless or neglectful of their dead.

The close-lying, coffin-shaped mounds of earth which mark the sites of the graves have many of them flowers or evergreen shrubs planted upon them; some have been more or less successfully turfed; while others have been set out with initials or emblems traced in pebbles or shells. Simple memorials certainly, but the work of loving hands and the tributes of loving hearts.

⁶¹² Francis et al., *The Secret Cemetery*, pp. 22-23

⁶¹³ Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom*, p. 90.

⁶¹⁴ Julie-Marie Strange suggests that ‘often situated in obscure locations (notably by waste sites or behind ‘back boundary walls’) ... the public grave signified the marginalisation of the poor’. *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain*, p. 146.

The same account describes a grave of a child that was

thickly set with 'sweet Williams' and other old-fashioned flowers [and] marked by a home-made slab-wood headboard. On this is carved in rude capitals the word 'Mitey', and under that is written in rough uneven lettering the text 'Is it well with the child? It is well.'⁶¹⁵

Julie-Marie Strange writes 'the improvisation of memorials suggested that for some families, simply marking the grave carried significance as a form of remembrance, no matter how makeshift.'⁶¹⁶ As the evidence shows, horticulture was a key way in which to do this.

However, as time passed the state of Victoria Park Cemetery deteriorated. It would have been difficult to maintain a garden-like landscape when every spare inch was taken up by a grave. Perhaps the fact that it was so overcrowded that new burials were infrequent led to a lack of daily visitors, or even of gravediggers at work. If no revenue was being generated by new burials, there would have been little incentive to pay for guardians. In 1870, five boys were arrested for stealing iron railings from round a family tomb, breaking them up by dashing them against a headstone and selling them for 2d to a scrap metal dealer in Bethnal Green.⁶¹⁷ Lieut.-Col. Sexby writes that it became 'the resort of the loafers and roughs of the East End who came here to gamble and amuse themselves by the wanton destruction of the decaying property.'⁶¹⁸ However, it could be argued that sections of the community still valued and used the open space of the cemetery for their own purposes, however offensive to others. According to Sexby, the cemetery was finally closed in 1876, though Mrs. Basil Holmes describes a funeral in 1884 where the clerk 'brought a handful of earth out of his pocket to throw upon the coffin'⁶¹⁹ to avoid having to use the large, wet lumps of clay lying around. It may be that this was a case of a family

⁶¹⁵ Thomas Wright [The Riverside Visitor], *The Pinch of Poverty: Sufferings and Heroism of the London Poor*, (London: Isbister and Company, 1892), p. 63.

⁶¹⁶ Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain*, p. 180.

⁶¹⁷ *The Times*, 31 March 1870, p. 11.

⁶¹⁸ Sexby, *The Municipal Parks*, p. 571.

⁶¹⁹ Holmes, *The London Burial Grounds*, p. 295.

member being placed in a family tomb, which was still permitted even in a closed cemetery or graveyard.

Conclusion

All three cemeteries considered in this section were successful in providing a decent place of burial in their early years, but they could not keep this up as their capacity to accept new burials came under pressure. Victoria Park Cemetery declined sooner than the others because it was so much smaller, but even Abney Park did not escape. In an effort to maintain profitability, concessions had to be made, from taking in the bodies of cholera-struck prisoners to increasing the number of common graves and losing space for the grass and plants that had made the cemeteries rivals for parks. The efforts made by the owners of the plots to memorialise their relatives would have brought some colour and proof of care, but as time went on and there was space for fewer and fewer burials, fewer people would have visited and the cemetery companies would have had fewer reasons to spend money or labour on maintenance.

James Curl writes

as the nineteenth century passed...the moral, uplifting, and educational arguments in favour of cemeteries dwindled as utilitarian notions came to the fore, and there was less talk of cemeteries as open-air art galleries or botanic gardens.⁶²⁰

However, they remained as areas free of buildings and as such were of importance throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By the latter part of the nineteenth century, a new philanthropic interest in the provision of open space in areas as crowded as the East End of London brought new possibilities and different usages for these neglected burial grounds and cemeteries.

⁶²⁰ Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death*, pp. 176-177.

Chapter Five:
The Open Spaces Movement

PICTURE DELETED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS

Lord Meath, President of the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association, from 'The Diaries of Mary Countess of Meath, edited by her husband. (London: Hutchinson, n.d.), facing p.280.

Introduction

The unprecedented growth of towns and cities during the nineteenth century led to worries over health in the new overcrowded districts of all such places, but particularly in London. Parks were seen as lungs, the provision of fresh air as counteracting the ‘miasma’ of disease. As has been seen in Chapter 3, these worries were a strong motive for the creation of Victoria Park in the 1840s. In Chapter 4, it has also been shown that fears of the threat to health arising from the overcrowded intramural burials led to the creation of the new cemeteries. In this chapter the focus will be upon the later years of the century and upon smaller open spaces in the East End, seen ‘not simply as “lungs” but as recreational sites’ for the people who lived near them.⁶²¹ As David Reeder suggests, in the late nineteenth century ‘an emphasis on the park and the square as elite spaces dignifying the nation’s capital gave way to a more democratic version of the value of open spaces as necessary to the health and quality of life of Londoners as a whole.’⁶²²

The 1880s is the period identified by P. J. Keating as the second during which ‘real or imagined class fears compelled people to look afresh at the basic social, economic and political structure of society.’⁶²³ It was a time of agricultural depression in the countryside and, according to José Harris, ‘rapidly rising living standards for the mass of the working class but increased insecurity and unemployment for a large minority.’⁶²⁴ She suggests that there was ‘a gradual transformation of more widely diffused popular attitudes towards poverty and public relief.’⁶²⁵ Though there was still a widespread belief, as held by the Charity Organisation Society, that a careful distinction should be made between the ‘deserving’ and the ‘undeserving’ poor, there was also a realisation that ‘some applicants

⁶²¹ Malchow, ‘Public Gardens and Social Action in Late Victorian London’, p. 102.

⁶²² David A. Reeder, ‘The social construction of green space in London prior to the Second World War’, in *The European City and Green Space*, ed. by Peter Clark (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), p. 41.

⁶²³ P. J. Keating, *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction*, p. 3.

⁶²⁴ José Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 239.

⁶²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

for poor relief were now admitted to be victims of uncontrollable social forces.⁶²⁶ There was a growing recognition that more facts were needed on the whole situation as regarded poverty and unemployment. Charles Booth is the most famous of those who came forward to undertake this work. He was already interested in conditions the East End in the late 1870s, an interest which would give rise to the great survey he began in 1886.⁶²⁷

At the same time, according to Martha Vicinus, 'philanthropy grew by leaps and bounds in response to the growing recognition of widespread poverty, inadequate housing, and social dislocation brought about by industrialization and urbanization.'⁶²⁸ Vicinus points out the growing number of upper and middle class women as well as men who concerned themselves with working on behalf of the poor. Hugh Cunningham suggests that 'philanthropists were not utopians or revolutionaries, and they worked with the grain of the economic, social and political structures of their times. It was this which gave them power and leverage.'⁶²⁹ One of the notable innovations was the Settlement Movement, when young university men and some women came to live in the East End with a view to providing not only help but the example of a different way of life. This culminated in the foundation of Toynbee Hall by Samuel and Henrietta Barnett in 1884.⁶³⁰ Many of the residents there believed that the classes should not be so separate and that those who had been born with more advantages should be prepared to help their fellow men and women who had had so little.

As well as concern for housing improvements and better education, some of the philanthropists were interested in the preservation of open space. The tone of their writings was different from those who had worked decades earlier for the formation of

⁶²⁶ Ibid., p. 239.

⁶²⁷ David Englander and Rosemary O'Day eds., *Retrieved Riches: Social Investigation in Britain 1840-1914* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995), pp. 14-15.

⁶²⁸ Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women 1850-1920* (London: Virago Press, 1985), p. 211.

⁶²⁹ Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500* 2nd edn (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2005), p. 138.

⁶³⁰ Alison Creedon, 'Only A Woman': *Henrietta Barnett, Social Reformer and Founder of Hampstead Garden Suburb* (Chichester: Phillimore, 2006), p. 85.

Victoria Park. Although they were also concerned about the health of those who lived in crowded places, they believed that open space offered, as Octavia Hill wrote, ‘that sense of quiet in which whispers of better things come to us gently...This is true of all classes; we all want quiet; we all want beauty for the refreshment of our souls.’⁶³¹ It was clear that there were many threats that endangered such spaces as remained, not only in the East End, from speculative builders.

Although these worries over vanishing open spaces had been in existence since the 1860s, they gained even more support as time passed and as wider concern over poverty and social order increased. By the 1880s, there were three main open space societies: the Commons Preservation Society, the Kyrle Society and the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association (from now on shortened to MPGA). However, the main emphasis in this chapter will be on the MPGA, which was the most important as far as work in the East End was concerned, though the existence of these other groups shows the significance of the open spaces movement in the late nineteenth century. These were all voluntary bodies, reliant upon the subscriptions of their members for funding, for there was no central national authority with responsibility for such matters. The Commons Preservation Society and the Kyrle Society operated nationally but, as its name implies, the MPGA restricted its activities to London.

Within London, the Metropolitan Board of Works did have a certain amount of overall responsibility. By a clause in the Metropolis Management Amendment Act of 1856, it was allowed to spend money to acquire land for parks and open spaces (19 & 20 Vic. C.112.).

The first to be authorised was Finsbury Park, followed by Southwark Park. Subsequently the Board became the owner of Battersea, Dulwich, Kennington, Ravenscourt and Victoria Parks. The MBW did not have to pay the full cost of

⁶³¹ Octavia Hill, *Homes of the London Poor*, (London: Macmillan, 1875; repr. Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger Publishing Legacy Reprints, n.d.), pp. 211-212. Octavia Hill was a noted social reformer. She was a pioneer of housing reform, with a unique system of managing housing for the very poor. She believed in enriching the lives of her tenants in every way possible apart from indiscriminate charity. She was also a founder member of the National Trust.

acquiring all this land, as Dulwich Park was a gift from the Governors of Dulwich College, Hammersmith Vestry shared the cost of Ravenscourt Park, and Battersea, Kennington and Victoria Parks were handed over by central government in 1887, after parliament had refused to continue the grant from the Exchequer for their upkeep. Other schemes for new parks were in hand when the Board was brought to an end in 1889.

The MBW also played an important part in preserving the remaining commons for the use of Londoners, although the initiative came from a group of campaigners who went on to form the Commons Preservation Society in 1865...The Board contributed to the cost of parks and open spaces provided by vestries and district boards. It was the first local authority in London able to take comprehensive steps to preserve open spaces, and but for its action many more districts would have been entirely unrelieved by any patch of green.⁶³²

But the Metropolitan Board of Works often needed to be spurred into action by activists such as members of the various open spaces societies and could be slow to respond.

The need for such open spaces was described by Octavia Hill, a founder member of the Kyrle Society, in a way designed to appeal to the sympathies of her well-to-do supporters, as reported in the *Times*:

Within four miles of Charing Cross there are nearly three millions of human beings...Among them...are thousands of men and women whose homes and surroundings are such that they are never alone for five minutes throughout their whole lives, never escape from the noise of children and the ceaseless din of the streets. For such the garden, park, or common affords the only approximation to solitude and quiet. Yet there are large tracts of London absolutely destitute of any corner of garden where the poor man may sit down for a few moments in peace.⁶³³

The major problem that had complicated the creation of smaller parks and open spaces was the confusion of legislation governing the transfer of gardens and disused burial grounds to public authorities, such as the local vestries. A series of Acts were passed in an attempt to simplify this, including the Recreation Grounds Act of 1859 (22 Vict., c.27) which was intended to facilitate the conveyance of open space lands to corporate bodies, but there were still difficulties when public authorities attempted to acquire land held in trust, as was the case with many London squares, or disused burial grounds. In 1863 the Town Gardens Protection Act (26 Vict., c.13) aimed to preserve

⁶³² Gloria C. Clifton, *Professionalism, Patronage and Public Service in Victorian London: The Staff of the Metropolitan Board of Works 1856-1889* (London: Athlone Press, 1992), pp. 28-29.

⁶³³ *The Times*, 17 Dec 1887, p. 16.

eleven open spaces in London at a time when Leicester Square was being threatened by building. This Act was intended to protect and provide for the proper management of square gardens that were being neglected by their original trustees, but it was not much used until reinforced by later legislation. In 1866 came the Metropolitan Commons Act (29 & 30 Vict., c.122), which, though important in preventing further enclosure of any metropolitan commons, did little to preserve or increase open spaces in the crowded areas of the city.⁶³⁴

The Public Health Act of 1875 specifically excluded London from its clauses concerning recreation grounds.⁶³⁵ The Metropolitan Open Spaces Act of 1877 (40 & 41 Vict., c.35) sought 'to afford facilities for making available the open spaces in and near the metropolis for the use of the inhabitants for exercise and recreation.'⁶³⁶ However, the Act was not sufficiently clear about exactly what powers the local boards of London had. It was thanks to the efforts of the Kyrle Society and the Commons Preservation Society that a further Metropolitan Open Spaces Act was passed in 1881 (44 & 45 Vict. c.34). It granted much greater powers to the Metropolitan Board of Works and local vestries to take over 'open spaces', which were defined as 'any land (whether inclosed or unenclosed) which is not built on, and which is laid out as a garden or is used for purposes of recreation, or lies waste and unoccupied.'⁶³⁷ It also included cemeteries, churchyards and burial grounds. The passing of this Act gave added impetus to the philanthropist Lord Brabazon's ambitions to form a society dedicated to creating gardens and recreation grounds in poor districts.

⁶³⁴ Malchow, 'Public Gardens and Social Action in Late Victorian London', p. 106, discusses these Acts at more length.

⁶³⁵ These clauses permitted local authorities to acquire land for recreation, compulsorily if necessary, and use public funds to maintain them.

⁶³⁶ 'Metropolitan Open Spaces Act' *Public Acts* 1877, 40 & 41 Vict., c.35.

⁶³⁷ 'Metropolitan Open Spaces Act' *Public Acts* 1881 (44 & 45 Vict., c.31).

The Commons Preservation Society and the Kyrle Society

As well as the practical pressure to improve the health of the poor in crowded districts, there was also a changing attitude, during the first half of the nineteenth century, towards the value of nature. In *Secure From Rash Assault*, James Winter suggests that since the eighteenth century there had been a recognition that wild places were worth preserving and that this feeling was reinforced by the Romantic poets, who ‘educated sensibilities to admire solitudes, ancient buildings and harmonious places’. Winter continues ‘From the middle of the nineteenth century onwards there was a perceptible widening of unease about the effects of technological advances and population growth on the natural and built environment.’⁶³⁸ The first group to come together to take action was the Commons Preservation Society, founded in 1865 by a London barrister and MP, George Shaw-Lefevre, and according to Robert Whelan, ‘Britain’s first national conservation body.’⁶³⁹ John Ranlett believes that ‘the foundation of that organization identifies a turning point in the public perception of society’s relationship to nature,’⁶⁴⁰ as before that time commons had largely been seen as wastes available to be improved or exploited and now many believed that they were precious open spaces which should be preserved for the use of the people. The Commons Preservation Society campaigned

to save the commons on London’s periphery from manor lords who wanted to enclose them or dig down in them for sand and gravel, from railway builders looking for inexpensive rights of way, and from speculative builders eager to lay out housing tracts.⁶⁴¹

Octavia Hill was an early member of the Society. Although willing to join in with both the Kyrle Society and the MPGA in securing legislation to protect open spaces, the Commons

⁶³⁸ James Winter, *Secure From Rash Assault: Sustaining the Victorian Environment*, (London: University of California Press, 1999), p. 24.

⁶³⁹ *Octavia Hill’s Letters to Fellow-Workers 1872-1911*, ed. by Robert Whelan (London: Kyrle Books 2005), p. 69 (note 6).

⁶⁴⁰ John Ranlett, ‘Checking Nature’s Desecration: Late-Victorian Environmental Organization’, *Victorian Studies*, 26 (1983), p. 198.

⁶⁴¹ Winter, *Secure From Rash Assault*, p. 204.

Preservation Society was not concerned with creating new, small gardens or recreation grounds.

The second open space society to be formed was the Kyrle Society, which developed out of a small committee formed in 1875 by Miranda Hill, sister of the better known Octavia. Its first efforts

had been to plant flowers on barren land, the draping of ugly buildings with creepers, the painting of walls in St. Jude's church in the slums of Whitechapel with panels of wild flowers, and the provision of window boxes and flowers.⁶⁴²

The Kyrle Society came into full operation in 1877 with the aim of spreading 'a love of beautiful things among our poor brethren.'⁶⁴³ Among its first committee members were the designer William Morris and the painter and sculptor George Frederick Watts.

Although Miranda is credited with founding the Society, it was Octavia who was the driving force and public face. She was Honorary Treasurer of the Society for thirty years and it was she who signed most of the letters to newspapers. For the Kyrle Society, provision of open space was only one of its aims, which also included the provision of music, books and good pictures in places such as hospitals, workmen's clubs and schools. Octavia Hill's first mentor had been John Ruskin, who had supported her earliest attempts at housing reform, and it may well have been his belief in the civilising effect of 'beautiful things' that coloured her own attitudes.⁶⁴⁴ The potential of the cultivation of open space to bring aesthetic, health and social improvements together in one reform movement was no doubt part of its appeal. As the history of the MPGA shows, such movements reflected the concerns of the day in the desire to promote projects of social reform and urban improvements without encouraging dependence on charity.

⁶⁴² Anne Hoole Anderson, in *Octavia Hill's Letters: Appendix 2: Bringing Beauty Home to the People: The Kyrle Society 1877-1917*, ed. by Whelan, p. 704.

⁶⁴³ Quoted in *The Times*, 28 Jan 1881, p. 10.

⁶⁴⁴ Whelan (ed.), *Octavia Hill's Letters, Appendix 2*, pp. 704-714.

The Metropolitan Public Gardens Association

Although the Commons Preservation Society and the Kyrle Society were important precursors, and continued their work throughout the century and beyond, it is the third open space society, the MPGA, founded by Lord Brabazon, an Anglo-Irish philanthropic aristocrat, heir to the Earl of Meath, that will be the focus of this chapter as the MPGA did most to provide gardens and playgrounds for the East End of London. Lord Brabazon was a ‘propagandist of clean living and physical health for the masses,’⁶⁴⁵ and together with his wife was determined to promote activities which would help to improve the condition of the working classes. He set up the Hospital Saturday Fund in 1874 and raised thousands of pounds. He was the first chairman of the Young Men’s Friendly Society.⁶⁴⁶ He supported the idea of public wash houses, laundries and swimming baths and was in favour of reducing the hours of shopworkers – all causes on which he wrote in his book of essays *Social Arrows*.⁶⁴⁷ He belonged to the Charity Organisation Society and the Kyrle Society.

José Harris writes of the view that

the character of a state was intrinsically bound up with the character of its citizens. This concern took on a new urgency from the 1880s as British politics became increasingly caught up in the politics of Empire, and as British citizens both male and female were viewed as the raw material of a new imperial race.⁶⁴⁸

This would have accorded perfectly with Lord Brabazon’s opinions. Unlike the founders of Victoria Park, his wish to improve the health of the working classes did not arise from a fear that disease would spread from East to West, but from the fear of the degeneration of the race. He was a great supporter of the idea of the British Empire, and was later the founder of the Empire Day Movement, of which he was President from 1903-1913.⁶⁴⁹ Lord Brabazon and his wife were part of a long tradition of *noblesse oblige*, strengthened and extended by the growth of the Evangelical movement from the late eighteenth century. It

⁶⁴⁵ Ranlett, ‘Checking Nature’s Desecration’, p. 200.

⁶⁴⁶ *The Times*, 12 Oct 1929, p. 15.

⁶⁴⁷ Lord Brabazon, *Social Arrows*, 2nd edn (London: Longman, Green, 1887).

⁶⁴⁸ Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit*, p. 181.

⁶⁴⁹ J. O. Springhall, ‘Lord Meath, Youth, and Empire’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 5 (1970), p. 103.

was exemplified in the earlier part of the nineteenth century by Lord Shaftesbury who, among all his other philanthropic undertakings, was a strong believer in the encouragement of a love of flowers in the urban working classes. For example in 1865, when presenting the prizes at the Window Gardens for the Poor Annual Show in Bloomsbury Square, Shaftesbury said that he would be attending three flower shows just that week ‘and whereas there were only two such flower shows in London last year, this year there were over twenty.’ In the course of the same speech he said that the Reverend Parkes, founder of the Window Gardens for the Poor movement, ‘which was accomplishing so vast an amount of moral good, was just as much a benefactor as the man who invented the steam engine or any of the other wonders of the age.’⁶⁵⁰ Rather than encouraging flower shows, Lord Brabazon applied his energies in the context of the East End by protecting and cultivating such open spaces as remained there.

As pointed out in the introduction to this chapter, there had been a well documented change of attitude to the poor in the latter part of the century, particularly amongst the urban elite, as evidence from social inquiries questioned the extent to which poverty was self-inflicted. It was against this background that, on Monday 20th November 1882, Lord Brabazon chaired a meeting at his London home, 83 Lancaster Gate, Bayswater. The meeting was attended by twenty-six others, including seven clergymen and eight women. These were men and women whose motivation did not include a hope of profit, unlike the groups who formed the cemetery companies, but a sense of duty and a philanthropic wish to do good to their fellow human beings. Although there were MPs among the membership, the society was completely independent of government. There was no question of involving any of the poor they were intent on benefiting, other than as paid employees. From the very earliest days the membership contained a very large proportion

⁶⁵⁰ *Holborn and Bloomsbury Journal*, 8 July 1865, p. 2.

of aristocrats, and eventually had the King as patron. It was, the *Gardeners' Chronicle* reported a few years later

[a]n interesting example of the tendency in this country to effect great reforms, and to institute great works of utility and even necessity, by means of private enterprise rather than by official agency.⁶⁵¹

In his opening address, Lord Brabazon set out the objects of the meeting – ‘the formation of a society which should have for its main object the giving to the people gardens, and to the children playgrounds.’⁶⁵² One might argue today that this was an objective in which Lord Brabazon and his supporters could do good for the poor without venturing into the more contentious areas of indiscriminate charity of giving money or goods to individuals without proper investigation of their circumstances. Brabazon pointed out that the metropolitan parks were inaccessible to a great many poor people.⁶⁵³ Therefore all too many had nowhere to go for healthy outdoor recreation. He suggested that ‘there was plenty of land which might be gratuitously acquired and used as garden or playground...[such as] disused burial grounds and closed churchyards.’⁶⁵⁴ A generation had passed since the latter had been used for burials (the Burial Act of 1852 had forbidden interments in churchyards within the metropolis) and many of them now ‘exhibited a shocking spectacle of ruin and desolation.’ He also suggested that land might be ‘rescued from the builder.’⁶⁵⁵ H. J. Dyos points out that a great building boom had developed in London in the late 1870s which came to a head in 1880-81 – just before the moment when Lord Brabazon voiced his concern.⁶⁵⁶ Incumbents, prevented from sanctioning any more burials in their churchyards, were tempted to raise money by selling them off.⁶⁵⁷ Lord

⁶⁵¹ Quoted in Jordan, ‘Public Parks, 1885-1914’, p. 89.

⁶⁵² MPGA, Minute Book 1, p. 2, CLC/011/MS/11097/001, London Metropolitan Archives, London.

⁶⁵³ Most of the parks were in the West End, inaccessible either because they were too far from the places in which the poor lived or because they demanded a certain standard of dress which the poor could not meet.

⁶⁵⁴ MPGA, Minute Book 1, p.3.

⁶⁵⁵ Ibid., p.4.

⁶⁵⁶ H. J. Dyos, ‘The Speculative Builders and Developers of Victorian London’, *Victorian Studies*, 11 (1968), p. 660.

⁶⁵⁷ This situation was tackled by the MPGA and the Kyrle Society, who succeeded in 1884 in persuading Parliament to pass an Act which forbade building on any land that had been used for burials. Once any

Brabazon thought that such sites should be acquired and, after laying out, be handed over to some public body for maintenance – the Metropolitan Board of Works, local vestries, or the Corporation of the City of London. He rightly realised from the beginning that the cost to the proposed Association of keeping the spaces in good order would be too high and that as the Association had no certain fixed income, they could not take on the responsibility.

Lord Brabazon continued by referring to two other societies that were also concerned with the provision of open spaces: the Kyrle Society (of which he himself was a member and for which his wife worked) and the National Health Society. The latter had been formed in 1871 by Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, ‘Europe’s first modern woman doctor.’⁶⁵⁸ Although interested in open spaces as part of its campaign to improve health, the society’s main aim was to ‘effect the steady and wide diffusion of sanitary knowledge among all the people.’⁶⁵⁹ He did not mention the Commons Preservation Society, probably because it was not concerned with the provision of gardens or recreation grounds but with preserving wilder open spaces.

The Kyrle Society had relegated all the business regarding open spaces to a sub-committee, said Lord Brabazon. It had therefore

been able to achieve a very inconsiderable amount of success in the matter which he had so deeply at heart. It was on account of the apathy and inability of the open spaces committee of the Kyrle Society that he had been led to desire the formation of an influential society which should devote itself to the one object and its kindred branches.⁶⁶⁰

Before proceeding with creating a new society he had met with Octavia Hill and C.E.

Maurice of the Kyrle Society and Ernest Hart, Chairman, and Miss Lankester, Secretary, of the National Health Society to see if it would be possible to unite the open spaces sections of all three societies. The National Health Society had agreed – Miss Lankester was

commercial value had been lost, many incumbents were more ready to allow the grounds to be opened as gardens.

⁶⁵⁸ Whelan (ed.), *Octavia Hill's Letters*, p.132 (note 1).

⁶⁵⁹ Elizabeth Crawford, *Enterprising Women: The Garretts and their Circle* (London: Francis Boutle Publishers, 2002), p.49.

⁶⁶⁰ MPGA, Minute Book 1, p.5.

actually present at the meeting – but ‘Miss Hill and Mr Maurice declined to have anything to do with it.’⁶⁶¹ Ernest Hart, an ophthalmic surgeon and also a medical journalist, first with *The Lancet* and then with the *British Medical Journal*, would become the first Vice-president of the new Association.

The meeting concluded by formally setting up the Association, with the name ‘The Metropolitan Public Garden, Boulevard and Playground Association’. This rather cumbersome title was shortened to The Metropolitan Public Gardens Association in April 1885, and as such it is still in existence today. Lord Brabazon was elected Chairman and the Reverend Sidney Vatcher, Rector of St. Philip’s, Stepney, Hon. Secretary. In her diaries, Lord Brabazon’s wife Mary states that Sidney Vacher (sic) was the brother-in-law of Miss Lankester. The membership of the MPGA, at least at the beginning, was a close group of people united in their desire to improve the lot of the working poor. As well as the link between Miss Lankester and Mr. Vatcher, for example, Ernest Hart was brother-in-law of Samuel Barnett of Toynbee Hall who later became a supporter of the MPGA.

Lady Brabazon also describes an open space near the almshouses which Vatcher wished to open to the public, partly because it was subject to vandalism by local boys, who

climb up on the trees and are ready to destroy everything, and bother the poor old ladies in the alms-houses out of their lives. There are seats placed where they could sit, but they are afraid to do so as the boys would throw stones at them.⁶⁶²

In his commentary on his wife’s diary, Lord Brabazon states that ‘Mr. Sidney Vacher ultimately succeeded in making a really beautiful little garden out of this dreadful spot’⁶⁶³ and goes on to say that it was the creation of this little garden that really led to the formation of the MPGA. Lord Brabazon may well also have been aware of the Rev. Samuel Barnett’s earlier attempts to provide pleasant open spaces. Barnett and his wife, prominent and sometimes controversial spokespersons for the poor, as early as 1875 had

⁶⁶¹ Ibid., p. 6.

⁶⁶² Lord Meath, *The Diaries of Mary Countess of Meath, edited by her Husband* (London: Hutchinson [n.d.]), p. 32.

⁶⁶³ Ibid., p. 33.

turned a piece of waste ground behind his church into a garden, and by 1881 had made a playground in Wentworth Street and another small park in Baker's Row.⁶⁶⁴ It is clear, therefore, that well before the formation of the MPGA, the connection between reform of open spaces and reform of behaviour had been made – indeed it was one of the stated aims that lay behind the creation of Victoria Park. However, it took on a new emphasis in the later part of the century and was given an extra impetus by the efforts of the MPGA.

At the first meeting of the MPGA various members agreed to be responsible for keeping the Association informed 'as to what spaces were available or what illegal building encroachments were being made'⁶⁶⁵ within their own districts. A rough draft of the prospectus was adopted. This was later formulated as the Objects of the Association, in which its aims were clearly stated:

This Association has been formed for the purpose of supplying one of the most pressing wants of the poorer districts within the Metropolitan area, namely to provide breathing and resting-places for the old, and playgrounds for the young, in the midst of densely populated localities.

To achieve this, it would

endeavour to secure, for the purposes of health and recreation, available vacant plots of ground, large or small...to obtain the right of laying out, and planting, and seating all Disused Burial Grounds, waste places and enclosed squares...these will be laid out either as gardens, or as garden and playground combined, or as playgrounds pure and simple.⁶⁶⁶

But it would not confine itself just to securing open spaces; it wished to concern itself with 'everything that tends to the health and physical well-being of the people.'⁶⁶⁷ It would therefore provide gymnastic apparatus for elementary schools as well as placing it in parks, agitate for the opening of school playgrounds out of school hours, endeavour to plant trees and place seats in the wider streets and even try to obtain the building of baths, wash-houses and swimming baths. Lord Brabazon reported that subscriptions and

⁶⁶⁴ Creedon, *'Only A Woman'*, pp. 82-83.

⁶⁶⁵ MPGA, Minute Book 1, p. 12.

⁶⁶⁶ MPGA, Fifth Annual Report, 1887, p.40. The objects of the association were printed regularly in the Annual Reports. Shelf Mark 08282.e British Library, London. All the Annual Reports are held under this Shelf Mark.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 41 .

donations amounting to £221 13s 0d had already been collected and that he had received estimates for planting trees in the Mile End Road. This was a wide thoroughfare and the addition of trees could be seen as a small move towards the Association's idea of public boulevards. The work of the Association was to be London-wide, but in this chapter only its projects in the East End will be considered. In so doing, it will become apparent how many small spaces there were in the area, which needed the initiative of outsiders to be brought into common use as places of recreation.

H. L. Malchow describes the 'advocates of metropolitan amenities' in 1881 as 'a disparate, loosely associated group of clergymen, spinsters, upper-class philanthropists, and a few radicals.'⁶⁶⁸ Malchow's somewhat disparaging statement may arguably have applied to the Kyrle Society and even to the original membership of the MPGA, but the latter possessed a nucleus of highly-motivated personnel, led by Lord Brabazon himself, who worked whole-heartedly for the cause and were able to pull in support from less involved members when needed. However amateur they may have been in the beginning, they were soon a very well-organised society. The idea of providing parks, gardens and playgrounds for the poor seems to have been uncontroversial, unlike providing direct financial aid to individuals who might not be worthy of receiving the charity. Brabazon was therefore able to attract a wide selection of the establishment as vice-chairmen. By 1888 the Association was able to announce the election of Cardinal Manning to the ranks, which already included two earls, a viscount, three lords, three baronets and the Jewish philanthropist F. D. Mocatta. The Cardinal attended some of the meetings, and on his death he was succeeded in the position by Cardinal Vaughan. The fact that there were large numbers of both Jews and Roman Catholics in the East End no doubt encouraged Lord Meath (as Lord Brabazon had become on the death of his father the Earl in 1887) to seek the support of leading members of those faiths for his work. It was not until 1895 that

⁶⁶⁸ Malchow, 'Public Gardens and Social Action in Late Victorian London', p. 108.

the Association elected a Bishop – but in this year they gained the Lord Bishop of Winchester and the Bishops of Bedford and Marlborough, and in 1898 the Bishops of London and Rochester. In 1893 the Association acquired its first actual Patron – the Prince of Wales, joined the following year by his son the Duke of York. The Prince remained Patron when he became King in 1901. The Earl of Meath recognised the importance of having influential men on his side and those men obviously felt that the MPGA was an organisation with which they were happy to be associated.

Although the three main societies concerned with the provision of open spaces boasted of their considerable influence and were widely reported at the time, their memberships were never particularly large and often overlapped. The Fifth Report of the MPGA, for 1886-7, states that the membership was now 499.⁶⁶⁹ It peaked at 868 in 1894.⁶⁷⁰ Judging by the Minutes, which record the names of those attending the monthly meeting, very few of these were active enough to turn up, though they could be relied upon for subscriptions and donations. Many were members of the House of Lords and House of Commons, as well as various other philanthropic organisations, and could and did support Lord Meath's activities to influence the changing of attitudes.

For reasons of clarity, the rest of this chapter is divided into two sections: the first considers the members of the Association and their roles within it; the second considers some of the projects the Association took on. This will permit an enquiry into the class dynamics of the Association and how the work it took on was carried out and also into the various problems and solutions that were found in the course of discovering and preserving the various spaces within the East End.

⁶⁶⁹ MPGA, Fifth Annual Report, 1887.

⁶⁷⁰ MPGA, Twelfth Annual Report, 1894.

Running the Association

The membership of the Association may have been drawn from the upper as well as the middle classes, but in order to do its day to day work, the MPGA needed to draw on the efforts of mostly middle class men and women who had the time, knowledge and confidence to take on the responsibilities and who could be relied upon to supervise the working class employees who would actually do the physical work of turning the disused burial grounds and other spaces into gardens and playgrounds and the superintendents and caretakers who would look after the sites once they were up and running. This approach on the part of the Association fits in well with the general model of welfare schemes in the later nineteenth century many of which were becoming far more highly organised than had been the case earlier.

Middle Class Professionals

In October 1883, approaching its first anniversary, the Association elected its first paid secretary, Captain George Ivan Thompson (who had attended the inaugural meeting), at a salary of £50 per year. Miss Isabella Gladstone, who had also been a member from the very beginning, became Honorary Secretary, and would play an enormous part in the organisation. Just as women such as Beatrice Potter and Clara Collet were trusted with a major role in Charles Booth's investigation of conditions in the poorest parts of London, so was Isabella Gladstone in the investigations conducted by the MPGA. In the first year of the Association's existence, she visited a large number of metropolitan burial grounds, going alone into potentially hostile areas and questioning people who had illegally taken them over as drying grounds or building yards.⁶⁷¹ The local inhabitants who had found

⁶⁷¹ Mrs. Basil Holmes, *The London Burial Grounds*, pp. 15-19.

their own use for these open spaces were sometimes resentful of an outsider of a different class who seemed to take a totally different view. But as Martha Vicinus suggests

Charitable work gave women freedom to walk and move in areas that were previously forbidden...The streets of the slums, away from upper-class men's eyes, were theirs; no matter how much they might be teased by little boys or abused by drunks, they carried a kind of immunity along the streets of the drab slums they sought to uplift.⁶⁷²

A list of the sites was published in the Association's first Annual Report in 1884.

In a complimentary reference to her on the tenth anniversary of the foundation of the Association, it was said

that if...Miss Isabella Gladstone...had not by personal visits to the most crowded portions of the Metropolis, acquired an almost unrivalled knowledge of the needs of London in the matter of open spaces, it would have been impossible for you to have accomplished one-tenth of the work which has since been carried out.⁶⁷³

In 1895, she was responsible for compiling a complete list of burial grounds throughout London for the London County Council which was published in book form in 1896, under her married name of Mrs. Basil Holmes. It became a major reference book, still much quoted today. Mr. Basil Holmes was a fellow member of the Association, they were married in 1887 and in 1888 he succeeded Captain Thompson as Secretary at a salary of £200 per year. Together, Mr. and Mrs. Holmes continued to play an important part in the work of the Association.

It had been from the beginning the Association's intention that the new gardens should provide an attractive environment for their users, properly laid out with walks, flowers, shrubs and seats. In November 1883, it appointed its first Honorary Landscape Gardener. Just two years after its foundation, the Association and its aims were apparently well enough known for Mr. Joseph Forsyth Johnson, of New Bond Street, to write in offering his services 'in preparing plans, gratuitously, for laying out public gardens,

⁶⁷² Vicinus, *Independent Women*, p. 220.

⁶⁷³ MPGA, Tenth Annual Report, 1892.

playgrounds, boulevards, etc.’ and his offer was gratefully accepted.⁶⁷⁴ He provided an estimate for work at St. Bartholomew’s Church, Bethnal Green. In February 1884, however, the Secretary was forced to admit that he had forgotten to invite Miss Fanny Wilkinson, who was already providing estimates for the work of laying out a churchyard in Chelsea and had sent in a rival – and lower – estimate for the laying out of St. Bartholomew’s, to accept this post. She was hastily appointed as ‘another honorary landscape gardener to the Association.’⁶⁷⁵ Mr. Johnson makes very few appearances in the Minutes, and resigned in July 1885, whereas Miss Wilkinson attended virtually every meeting and remained, first in an Honorary capacity and then in a paid position, until 1904. Born in 1856, daughter of a well-to-do Manchester doctor, she had completed an eighteen-month course at the Crystal Palace School of Gardening⁶⁷⁶ and would become Principal of Swanley College of Horticulture in 1902, when it became an all-women’s college. She and her sisters were part of the circle of middle-class, trained, professional women that formed around the Garrett family, a ‘set of women, who...dominated the campaigns to improve the position of women in Britain in the second half of the 19th century.’⁶⁷⁷ It may well be that she had first come into contact with the MPGA through her father’s contacts with Ernest Hart, as Dr. Wilkinson was President of the British Medical Association at the time that Hart was editor of its publication, the *British Medical Journal*. As well as drawing up plans for every site the Association took over, Fanny Wilkinson was responsible for obtaining estimates from contractors, for the employment of the labourers who worked on

⁶⁷⁴ MPGA, Minute Book 1, p. 69.

⁶⁷⁵ MPGA, Minute Book 1, p. 83.

⁶⁷⁶ The Crystal Palace School of Landscape Gardening and Practical Horticulture. Its Principal was Edward Milner, a former assistant of Joseph Paxton. No further information about this School has been discovered. Crawford, *Enterprising Women*, p. 219.

⁶⁷⁷ Crawford, *Enterprising Women*, p. 9.

laying out the gardens and for the sourcing of the plants,⁶⁷⁸ handling quite large sums of money at times.

A further indication of Fanny Wilkinson's professional attitude to her work for the Association came in June 1885. Lord Brabazon explained to that month's meeting that Miss Wilkinson was spending so much time, and incurring considerable expense, on her work for the Association, that he proposed she should be allowed to claim 5 per cent on all payments made by her, other than that for the 'unemployed' labourers. In January 1886 it was agreed that, as the 5 per cent she was allowed to charge did not cover her expenses, it might be better if she gave that up and merely charged expenses 'but would wish to leave the final decision in her hands.'⁶⁷⁹ In February she decided she no longer wished to be 'Honorary' but would prefer to charge a percentage on everything she did for the Association. As she put it in her letter 'As I have before stated, my time I am very glad to give to the work, but I cannot afford to lose by it.'⁶⁸⁰ She was, according to Elizabeth Crawford, 'England's first professional woman landscape designer'⁶⁸¹ and also worked in this capacity for the Kyrle Society, quite apart from her work for private clients. She took women pupils into her office and when she eventually retired from the MPGA after nineteen years, her successor was also a woman, Madeline Agar, who had been Miss Wilkinson's assistant. Given her obviously solid position within the Association, it is strange that in 1887 Lord Brabazon made an appointment that on the surface seems something of an insult to Miss Wilkinson: Mr W. Goldring, who had laid out the gardens of the American Exhibition⁶⁸² at West Brompton, was made Honorary Inspector of Gardens. The gardens he had designed, featuring American flowering plants, surrounded

⁶⁷⁸ There is no indication in the Association's Minutes as to where she obtained plants, but there are several references to 'gifts of plants' from members. MPGA Minute Book 5, p. 46; MPGA Minute Book 6, p. 18; *ibid.*, p. 21; *ibid.*, p. 41, CLC/011/MS/11097/005 and 006, London Metropolitan Archives, London.

⁶⁷⁹ MPGA, Minute Book 4, p. 19, CLC/011/MS/11097/004, London Metropolitan Archives, London.

⁶⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁶⁸¹ Crawford, *Enterprising Women*, p. 218.

⁶⁸² The Exhibition, described in *The Times*, 10 May 1887, p. 10, featured a Wild West display by Buffalo Bill among its more traditional exhibits and had been visited with great success by the Queen and a Royal party.

two of the most popular attractions of the exhibition – perhaps Lord Brabazon could see the publicity value of being associated with their designer. Like Mr. Johnson, Mr. Goldring had apparently offered his services – so perhaps it was just easier for Lord Brabazon to accept and find him a position rather than possibly court bad publicity by refusing.⁶⁸³ Goldring provided a list of trees and shrubs suitable for planting in London and Suburbs which was printed regularly in the Association's Annual Reports, but otherwise seems to have played no part in the Association's activities.

It can thus be seen that two of the most significant and hard-working members of the MPGA were women. Neither was in any sense a social worker, a 'social mother' as described by Eileen Yeo,⁶⁸⁴ carving a public role out of private duties, for although the Association was formed with philanthropic motives, Fanny Wilkinson claimed a salary for her very responsible position, and, although only an 'Hon' Secretary, Mrs. Basil Holmes's book demonstrates that she was a thorough researcher. Neither seems to have been directly associated with any of the poor people the MPGA hoped to benefit. Octavia Hill thought that 'ladies' were more appropriate for the visiting and supervision of the poor tenants as they would bring more genuine sympathy. Neither Wilkinson nor Holmes had that sort of relationship with the people they dealt with. The MPGA was not an organisation that went in for casework with individuals, as did the Kyrle Society or the Charity Organisation Society. Nevertheless, there was a role for women within the organisation.

Employees of the Association

The Association did share some common ground with the non-middle-class staff, the caretakers it employed to oversee the various playgrounds and gardens. Their duties

⁶⁸³ Goldring was assistant editor of the *Garden* magazine as well as being a professional landscape gardener. (Jordan, 'Public Parks: 1885-1914', p. 99).

⁶⁸⁴ Eileen Yeo, *The Contest For Social Science: Relations and Representations of Gender and Class*, (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1996).

were not specified, but as prizes were offered for the best kept gardens, it can be inferred that they included maintaining the planting. In April 1885 it was decided that an inspector of caretakers should be employed, and the post was given to Mr. Andrew Quinlan, who had formerly been chief caretaker at the Playground, Borough. He was required to visit all the grounds in the charge of the Association at least once a day, and a bicycle was purchased – a ‘Kangaroo’, from the Army and Navy Stores, priced £15 18s 2d – to enable him to do this. His pay was to be 25s per week. In December 1885 his pay was raised to 30s per week and he was given an advance ‘for the purchase of a tricycle, the money to be repaid by him in weekly instalments.’⁶⁸⁵ Eventually, however, it was decided that the tricycle should remain the property of the Association and that Mr. Quinlan should be given 1s a week for housing it. But it seems that the tricycle did not always answer, for Quinlan submitted accounts ‘for cab hire in visiting at night time the gardens being laid out, and for gratuities to workmen at Mile End.’⁶⁸⁶ He had apparently spent much more than he should have, and only received £4 6s 0d of the £8 6s. 0d he claimed. Nevertheless, in early 1887 he was appointed as gymnastic instructor for the boys who came to the increasing number of playgrounds that the Association had laid out. His place as garden inspector was taken by Mr. Collie, a gardener who had been a foreman and who was recommended by Miss Wilkinson. The Association could be practical and was not penny-pinching when it came to providing the necessary tools for its supervisor to do his job properly. They also were prepared to promote one of their own working-class staff members to a more senior post rather than bring in yet another middle-class person as overseer.

At the same time, the Association was keen to motivate its lower ranks. It gave £5 in prize money to be divided between the three caretakers who were considered to have best at keeping up the gardens in their charge for several years, but in giving the results for

⁶⁸⁵ MPGA, Minute Book 4, p. 9.

⁶⁸⁶ MPGA, Minute Book 4, p. 94.

1887, the Minutes announced a small problem over one winner ‘the caretaker Liston was at present serving a term of imprisonment for receiving stolen goods.’⁶⁸⁷ If that was not enough, Mr. Quinlan had had to be dismissed for drunkenness. He was in debt to the Association to the extent of £3 or £4 and owed the Secretary £2 10s. He was still bold enough to ask Association for funds to enable him to take out a cab licence – and the Association’s solicitor recommended that he should be given them. The council did not agree. The Association may have had its attention too much focused on its broader aims and was less successful in day-to-day ‘man management’.

The MPGA was always alert to current events and ready to take advantage of situations as they arose. In the winter of 1884/5, there had been a deputation of the unemployed to the Home Secretary, Sir William Harcourt, seeking work ‘that they could accept without feeling that it was only useless work given out of charity.’⁶⁸⁸ As a result of the publicity, an anonymous society lady contacted the Association to offer a donation of £1000 to employ such men on laying out the sites acquired by it, because, as she said ‘I suppose the open spaces turned into gardens are really a great benefit and source of health to the people.’⁶⁸⁹ This was gratefully accepted, and made the nucleus of an appeal, via a letter to the *Times* in March 1885, signed by Lord Brabazon, for a fund which would be devoted solely to the payment of wages. At the Association’s meeting on 7th April 1885, the Secretary reported that 57 men were currently employed and that up to the 5th April the fund stood at £2,603, £121 having been paid out as wages since 15th March. ‘A few of the ‘physically unfit’ were employed as night watchmen, as the tools, &c., the property of the Association, had to be left during the night on the several grounds. The men were paid 4d an hour, daily.’ It was thought necessary to engage a foreman and a timekeeper, ‘and to pay the men by the *hour*, so that if a man is an idler he may be dismissed at the end of his

⁶⁸⁷ MPGA, Minute Book 7, p.15, CLC/011/MS/11097/007, London Metropolitan Archives, London.

⁶⁸⁸ MPGA, Minute Book 2, p. 197, CLC/011/MS/11097/002, London Metropolitan Archives, London.

⁶⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

hour, and thus protect ourselves from wasting our funds on the idle.’⁶⁹⁰ It was agreed that the unemployed of the parish where the work was undertaken should always be given preference. Miss Wilkinson was responsible for employing and paying these labourers.⁶⁹¹

Among many philanthropists at the time there was an enormous concern that nothing should be done to encourage the ‘undeserving’ at the expense of the ‘deserving’.⁶⁹² The Charity Organisation Society, of which both Octavia Hill and Lord Brabazon were members, was formed in 1869 to ‘impose some order on philanthropic chaos’⁶⁹³ and to try to ensure that charity was given only to genuine cases of need where the recipient would really benefit from it. It has been described as ‘the archetypal expression of nineteenth century individualism.’⁶⁹⁴ It was thought that indiscriminate giving demeaned the recipient and destroyed any sense of independence and the Society believed that ‘independence of character was essential for overcoming poverty.’⁶⁹⁵ The Society was always concerned to

provide relief in cases where the distress is exceptional rather than where it is normal. Careful inquiry into every case is one of the most important features of the work, and the rule is only to give assistance where it will be of *permanent* advantage.⁶⁹⁶

The MPGA was caught up in these debates. In May, 1885, the matter of the rates of pay for labourers came up again and was anxiously discussed by the members present at the meeting that month. The Minute is given in its entirety, as it illustrates so clearly both how aware the Association was of the political context of their actions and also the attitudes of the time even among those genuinely anxious to help the poor.

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 229.

⁶⁹¹ In August 1885, she was criticised by the auditors for not being able to produce proper vouchers for some of her expenditure. MPGA, Minute Book 3, p. 303.

⁶⁹² Robert Whelan points out that this division, so much associated with the COS, was in fact ‘never as widespread in the COS as its critics have made out, and it faded out quite early in the Society’s history’. But ‘the essential characteristic of the COS approach was its selectivity: not all those who asked would receive.’ Robert Whelan, *Helping The Poor*, (London: Institute for the Study of Civil Society, 2001), pp. 21-22.

⁶⁹³ Brian Harrison, ‘Philanthropy and the Victorians’, *Victorian Studies*, 9 (1966), p. 366.

⁶⁹⁴ A.W. Vincent, ‘The Poor Law Reports of 1909 and the Social Theory of the Charity Organization Society’, *Victorian Studies*, 27 (1984), p. 343.

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 348.

⁶⁹⁶ C.O., ‘Report on Agencies and Methods for Dealing with the Unemployed’, *Economic Journal*, 4 (1894), p. 183.

Lord Brabazon expressed an opinion that the present rate of daily pay, viz., 4d an hour, although 1d less than the dock rate,⁶⁹⁷ was too high, and likely to draw labour to the Metropolis, and thereby increase the present distress. Mr. Arnold White⁶⁹⁸ feared that if the rate were much reduced the labour forthcoming would be of a useless character. He quite agreed with His Lordship, however, that it would be advisable to fix the rate at 3 ½ d per hour. Mr. Simmons was of opinion that the rate should be raised to 5d. Lord Brabazon considered that much of the day was wasted by their leaving off work at 5 p.m. Mr. Arnold White did not think that they had the bodily or mental power to work longer, and after further discussion, Mr. Arnold White proposed, Mr. Wooster seconded, and it was carried by one vote, that the rate of pay be reduced to 3 ½ d per hour. The vote of the Council in the matter being so very nearly equal it was unanimously agreed that the matter should be reconsidered at a future meeting, if so desired.⁶⁹⁹

In February 1886, came important recognition of the work the Association was doing in using the unemployed as its labourers: the Mansion House Relief Fund for the Unemployed in London sent a cheque for £1000 to be used for wages. The winter of 1886 was exceptionally severe, leading to unprecedented unemployment in the docks and the building trades and, in response to public demand, a fund had been set up by the Lord Mayor to relieve distress. By the beginning of February it only stood at £3,300. But on 8th February, there was a public meeting of about 20,000 of the unemployed in Trafalgar Square to demand public works to provide employment. As the meeting dispersed, it gradually turned into a riot, with window-breaking and looting in Mayfair and Piccadilly. Carriages were overturned in Hyde Park and their passengers robbed. Over the following two days, panic grew among the general public that mobs of unemployed from the slums of East and South London would invade the West. Money began to pour into the Fund, and by 23rd of February it had reached £60,000.⁷⁰⁰

⁶⁹⁷ As a result of the dock strike of 1872, the rate of pay for casual dock labourers had been raised from 4d to 5d per hour. The docks were major employers of casual labour.

⁶⁹⁸ White was a journalist who had studied social conditions in the East End. Lord Brabazon told the Duke of Westminster that White 'had brought the distress to the knowledge of the public by his letters to the *Times* and the *Pall Mall*...and has undertaken to find for us the genuine unemployed'. Letter reported in MPGA, Minute Book 2, p. 229. José Harris, however, characterises White as 'sensation-seeking' and as holding extreme views on the irredeemable nature of the 'residuum' of the unfit poor. José Harris, 'Between civic virtue and Social Darwinism: the concept of the residuum', in *Retrieved Riches*, eds. Englander & O'Day, p. 69.

⁶⁹⁹ MPGA, Minute Book 3, pp. 233-234, CLC/011/MS/11097/003, London Metropolitan Archives, London.

⁷⁰⁰ Much of the information about the riot is taken from Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, pp. 291-294. Although Brodie, in *The Politics of the Poor*, pp. 15-24, differs from Stedman Jones's interpretation of the riot, the resulting panic of the general public is not in question.

To the dismay of the Charity Organisation Society, money was dispensed with what they considered was a total disregard for the deserts of the recipients. They complained that instead of working through established local committees, such as those of the COS, the Mansion House Fund set up new committees which did not have enough experience to detect fraudulent applicants.⁷⁰¹ However, the MPGA was careful to take only men who were prepared to work for their pay. The question of rates had been discussed again, and the men were now to be paid at a rate of 4d an hour. It had also been proposed to employ the men for five hours a day instead of eight, and therefore employ more of them. It was decided to keep the eight hours, but to employ two gangs each day. A humane suggestion was made that if possible 'a contract should be made with a provision shop in the neighbourhood of their work, whereby four-pennyworth of food should be supplied daily to each man before he began his labours.'⁷⁰² The secretary of the Association consulted legal opinion to make sure that this did not violate the Truck Act.⁷⁰³ All metropolitan vestries and district boards were contacted and wherever possible work began almost immediately, 140 men being employed laying out the disused burial ground at St. John's, Hackney and 246 at St. Dunstan's, Stepney – both sites had been under negotiation for some time. The Rector of St. John's took on the feeding of the men, but unfortunately spent 6 ½ d rather than 4d and there was some debate in the Association as to whether it should be responsible for the overspend. Miss Wilkinson was among those who thought the Rector should be given at least something towards the extra expense.⁷⁰⁴

A month later, the minutes show that the Mansion House Fund allocated another £2,000 to the Association. Although anxious to move fast to spend all the money at its disposal, the Association still had to negotiate with incumbents and local officials, some of the former being reluctant to hand over control of their churchyards to an outside body and

⁷⁰¹ Robert Whelan, *Helping The Poor*, pp. 61-63.

⁷⁰² MPGA, Minute Book 4, p. 33.

⁷⁰³ The Truck Act of 1831 had made it illegal either to pay workers partly in goods or in tokens to be spent in a company run store.

⁷⁰⁴ MPGA, Minute Book 4, p. 84.

many of the latter being reluctant to shoulder the responsibility and expense of maintaining the gardens and recreation grounds after they had been laid out. In May, however, the Mansion House Fund gave another £500, and promised £1,200 later. When the Fund was closing down, in July, its remaining funds were to be divided equally between the Metropolitan Visiting and Relief Association, the Society for the Relief of Distress and the MPGA⁷⁰⁵ – a clear indication of the importance in the eyes of the Mansion House Committee of the Association's place in the distribution of the money to those able to make the best use of it.

Summary

The formation of Victoria Park in the 1840s was not a philanthropic enterprise undertaken by private individuals. It may have been sparked off by the sending of a petition by the inhabitants of Tower Hamlets, but there was no attempt to collect money locally or enlist any other form of local support once the decision to go ahead had been taken. Everything was organised from the centre under the Office of Woods and Forests and their architect James Pennethorne. The various Open Space societies later in the century were all formed by men and women enthusiastic for the cause, who collected money and worked personally, often at local level and on a smaller scale. The motivation in 1840 and 1880 may have had much in common, but the means of achieving the objective were very different.

The work of all three societies mentioned in this chapter, and especially that of the MPGA in the East End, is a clear demonstration of how closely linked were questions of improvement of the people and the improvement of the environment they lived in. Octavia Hill laid more emphasis on the improvement of their housing, while also recognising the need for places of calm recreation outside, but Lord Brabazon and his associates had the

⁷⁰⁵ *The Times*, 3 July 1886, p. 11.

ambition and the necessary drive to carry through a programme with a different emphasis, focused entirely on the creation of open spaces which both old and young could enjoy in their different ways. Although the upper and middle class men and women of the Association were firmly in charge, they did delegate some responsibility to their working class employees, even if this was sometimes, as in the cases of Quinlan and Liston, not a great success.

Examples of Work Undertaken by the Association

In his speech at the opening meeting of the MPGA, Lord Brabazon spoke of disused burial grounds and closed churchyards as sites that could be 'gratuitously acquired and utilized as garden or playground.'⁷⁰⁶ The Reverend Sidney Vatcher

spoke of the many desolate squares situated in his part of East London, between the Mile End and Commercial Roads, and which with the sanction of the landlords of surrounding houses might be converted into pleasant resting-places or into playgrounds.'⁷⁰⁷

In this section a representative sample of the two types of site, those of ecclesiastical origin and those of secular origin, has been chosen to show the different issues that had to be considered the MPGA when taking over a new open space. They were concerned with providing playgrounds for children as well as resting places for older people. Each of these uses involved discussions with both church and local authorities, and the chapter will show how the MPGA dealt with the various problems associated with acquiring the sites for public use. Sometimes, as with both the East London and the Victoria Park Cemetery, the owner was willing to hand the ground over but legal questions made this difficult to achieve. Sometimes, as with various disused burial grounds, the incumbent might be willing but the churchwardens were opposed and had to be coaxed into agreement. They feared unruly behaviour near to the church and on what was, after all, the resting place of

⁷⁰⁶ MPGA, Minute Book 1, p. 3.

⁷⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 7.

deceased members of their own locality. Garden squares also needed the co-operation of local residents who, since they lived on such squares tended to be of the middle class, were being asked to allow public use by the working class of semi-private space in front of their houses. And, as with the burial grounds, nearly always the vestries raised questions of cost of maintenance and the question of keeping good order. Negotiations were patiently conducted, sometimes over a considerable time. The final example, the Main Drainage Embankment, shows how the Association worked as a lobbying group within Parliament by using its influential members and mustering local supporters where necessary. By means of these examples, both the possibilities and the constraints of opening up spaces for public use will be demonstrated. The different origins of each kind of open space - religious or secular – dictated the functions considered appropriate to each.

Disused Burial Grounds and Cemeteries

East London Cemetery

One of the first potential sites to be brought to the Association's attention, as early as January 1883, was 'Beaumont Burial Ground'. This was more usually known as the East London Cemetery, and this is how it will be referred to in this section. As shown in the preceding chapter, this cemetery had been in existence since at least 1837. By 1883, according to the Rev. Vatcher, it had been closed and disused for thirty years. He added that nothing could be done about it without the consent of the trustees, and that this had been refused.⁷⁰⁸ All went quiet, at least as far as recorded in the MPGA Minutes, until exactly two years later, when Mr Beaumont, a member of the Association and owner of the cemetery, stated that he would like to re-open negotiations. The Association decided to ask if they might prepare plans and estimates meanwhile for his consideration.⁷⁰⁹ On 6th

⁷⁰⁸ MPGA Minute Book 1, p. 19.

⁷⁰⁹ MPGA Minute Book 2, p. 173.

March, Captain Thompson met with Mr. Beaumont, and the latter offered him a lease of the cemetery ground – about 5 ½ acres – at a peppercorn rent.⁷¹⁰ Mr. Beaumont was a noted philanthropist in the East End, and he also agreed to guarantee the cost of laying it out immediately as a public garden. This was later stated to have been £470, presumably excluding the cost of the labour. At a further meeting, Mr. Beaumont offered to transfer his life interest in the ground to the Association, an offer that was gratefully accepted. By May, Lord Brabazon had signed the lease, but unfortunately, thanks to the conditions laid down by the solicitors, only about two-thirds of the ground would be available. Nevertheless, it was agreed that the laying-out should go ahead at once.⁷¹¹ This must have been done with great speed, as it was ready for its formal opening on 1st July. It was opened by the Duchess of Marlborough, in the presence of many local dignitaries and officials of the MPGA, and was reported by the two local newspapers. The account in the *East London Observer* was brief, but its reporter was obviously impressed by what had been achieved in the creation of a garden and recreation ground

And such a garden! Laid out in neatly-gravelled walks, with rustic seats beneath the cypress and willow trees, and above all, beautifully laid out with the choicest of summer flowers, in the most artistic manner...it was a veritable oasis in the surrounding desert of poverty and wretchedness.⁷¹²

The cypress and willows had probably been part of the original décor of the cemetery. The *East London Advertiser* gave the event much more space, but seems to have been less impressed.

The space is intended more as a playground than anything else, it is easy to understand why no very large amount of ornamentation in the way of flowers has been lavished on the grounds, but green trees and green grass are there; an ornamental fountain plays in the centre of the large gravelled space in the middle of the ground, and yet another fountain, designed to meet the requirements of the thirsty little mouths whose owners will cluster round it in the hot summer months, amply recompense for the lack of flowers, and doubtless will be better appreciated by the children of the neighbourhood.

⁷¹⁰ Ibid., p. 202.

⁷¹¹ MPGA, Minute Book 3, p. 236.

⁷¹² *East London Observer*, 4 July 1885, p. 7.

It also pointed out that

contrary to the general rule, the tombstones have not been removed and ranged round the side of the garden, but remain in their old positions, and are sufficiently protected from the hands of the children who avail themselves of the garden by iron railings.⁷¹³

In the course of his speech at the opening, Lord Brabazon said that the drinking fountain had been the gift of Mr. Beaumont and Louisa Lady Goldsmid and that the Association had paid for the ornamental one. He pointed out that the work of laying out had been done by the 'unemployed' labourers. Other speeches were made by the Reverend J.F. Kitto, Rector of St. Dunstan's, and Mr. A. Furness, chairman of the Mile End Vestry. Mr. Kitto said that this was the third time they had assembled within four or five weeks to celebrate the opening of a garden in Stepney.⁷¹⁴ He was glad that the East London Cemetery recreation ground was to be dedicated to children, since adults had nearby Trafalgar Square to sit in peacefully. A startled 'correspondent' reported on 11th July, that 'no adult persons are allowed in, so that the only way for adults to get in to see the graves is to pick up some stray child and get in.'⁷¹⁵ No other account mentions this proviso, leading one to suspect that it was either a misunderstanding or an exaggeration on the part of the correspondent and that children were merely encouraged to play there in ways they were not in other gardens.

Mr. Furness proposed a vote of thanks to Mr. Beaumont, and also mentioned the £1,000 the Vestry had given towards laying out Trafalgar Square. Mr. Beaumont's son responded on behalf of his father. The former wrote a gracious letter of thanks 'for the charming tone which pervaded the whole ceremony.' He had been too ill to attend himself, and in his letter he also said 'I have provided for the payment at my death to the Association of a sum which I anticipate will more than cover all the expenses incurred in

⁷¹³ *East London Advertiser*, 4 July 1885, p. 7.

⁷¹⁴ The other two were Trafalgar and Carlton Squares, which will be dealt with in the next section.

⁷¹⁵ *East London Observer*, 11 July 1885, Supplement, n.p.

the formation of the Park.’ He also enclosed a cheque for £25 to pay for the ornamental fountain.⁷¹⁶

Although most of the gardens created by the Association assumed the presence of children, in these larger spaces more provision could be made for them, sometimes by supplying special gymnastic apparatus. Not only was the aim to make them more healthy, but also happy, for as Hugh Cunningham writes of the later nineteenth century ‘reformers and philanthropists were deeply imbued with the romantic belief that childhood should be happy, the best time of life.’ Cunningham also quotes a statement made by the educationalist Friedrich Froebel in the book *The Education of Man*, published in 1887: ‘play is the highest phase of child development.’⁷¹⁷ But the desire to provide amenities for the children of the East End did not always preclude a robust attitude towards their safety, as revealed in one MPGA Minute of 1887

The Hon. F. M. Stuart Wortley explained that he thought the barbed wire, used to keep the children off the beds at the entrance to this ground, [the East London Cemetery] was very dangerous. The Secretary stated that it was found absolutely necessary, as the children used to sit and swing on any other kind of wire fencing and steal the flowers. Miss Wilkinson agreed in this statement, and, as no complaints had been made from the side of the children, the matter was allowed to rest.⁷¹⁸

Anna Davin warns

investigation and discussion of working class childhood around the turn of the century was carried out by people whose own experience and definitions of childhood were middle class, and who took for granted the superiority of their own ways.⁷¹⁹

People such as Octavia Hill thought that playing in the street was both morally and physically dangerous. She wanted volunteers to help in the various playgrounds, for she believed that the superintendents were sometimes ‘a little inclined to think more of the

⁷¹⁶ MPGA, Minute Book 3, p.282.

⁷¹⁷ Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500*, p. 161.

⁷¹⁸ MPGA, Minute Book 6, p. 36.

⁷¹⁹ Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor: Home, School and Street in London, 1870-1914* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1996), p. 170.

flowers than of those for whom they were planted' and thought that was 'less trouble to have playgrounds empty than full.' She went on

[t]he board school playgrounds are announced as at last opened in compliance with our request, but it is hard on the care-takers to imagine that they can keep the playgrounds full of life and order without help, especially till the children have learned to play.

In the same letter she suggested that 'in the hot summer, flowers, or beads, or pictures, or seaweeds, or needlework, might make groups of little children very happy in the gardens.'⁷²⁰ Perhaps it is no wonder that some children preferred the freedom of the streets, where there were no park keepers to interfere or caretakers to keep order and there was plenty of scope for play, as Anna Davin describes.⁷²¹

Once the garden was opened, the conductor of the West India Dock drum and fife band wrote in to suggest that his band should play there on Wednesday 15th July. After a debate as to whether a charge should be made for admission – it was decided not – the band was invited to play from 7 to half past 8 p.m., 'handbills being issued in the neighbourhood to state that the music would only continue during the good conduct of the audience.'⁷²² It was not only children who had to learn orderly behaviour – and again it was the improvement of the environment that was intended to help with this.

In accordance with the stated principles of the Association, once the work of transforming the cemetery into a garden had been finished, the question of its future maintenance had to be formalised. In October Lord Brabazon wrote to the Mile End Old Town Vestry, inviting them to take over the Association's interests in the ground and become responsible for its maintenance. The Vestry replied in January 1886, saying that, under the Metropolitan Open Spaces Act 1881, it was not legally able to take it over as it was laid out as a playground. The Vestry's solicitor was worried by a clause in the Act which stated

⁷²⁰ Whelan (ed.), *Octavia Hill's Letters*, p. 119.

⁷²¹ Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor*, pp. 67-68.

⁷²² MPGA, Minute Book 3, p. 282.

Any estate or interest in or control over any open space, churchyard, cemetery, or burial ground acquired by the Metropolitan Board, or any vestry or district board under the provisions of this Act, shall be held and administered by such board or vestry in trust to allow, and with a view to, the enjoyment by the public of such open space, churchyard, cemetery, or burial ground in an open condition, free from buildings and under proper control and regulation, but shall not allow the playing of any games or sports therein.⁷²³

Lord Brabazon firmly stated in reply that it was not illegal – that children were confined to the parts where there were no burials and that, although at the moment there were short posts for skipping ropes in that area, they could be removed if the Vestry wished. He continued

Without any infringement of the clauses of the Act, the ground, as at present laid out, with its gravelled walks, seats, trees, and fountains would prove an inestimable boon to the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, and my Association hopes that this pleasant spot may, within a short time, be the property of your Vestry, which has shown itself so willing in the past to provide for the wants of the people.⁷²⁴

Mile End Old Town was one of the very few vestries in the East End⁷²⁵ that would take over from the Association without a struggle, and as has been shown, their opposition was on legal, not financial, grounds. Most of the others with which the MPGA had to deal were too concerned with the potential effect on the rates.

In July, the Vestry were still arguing that although they were perfectly willing to take the ground over, their solicitor said it would be illegal. An additional complication was that Mr. Beaumont had died, and the future of the ground would now be up to his trustees. By October, Captain Beaumont, his son, wrote to say that he was very happy for the Agreement between his father and the Association to continue. He even suggested he would try to increase the amount of land available for the children to play on. He was very anxious to be co-operative, but equally had to take care not to land himself with a lawsuit if any of the tombstones were moved. He and Miss Wilkinson would look into the question

⁷²³ Metropolitan Open Spaces Act *Public Acts* 1881 44 & 45 Vict. c.34.

⁷²⁴ MPGA, Minute Book 4, p. 29.

⁷²⁵ The account of the inaugural meeting of the MPGA shows that Mr. Cushem, the then Chairman of the Mile End Vestry, had been present and had encouraged the MPGA to take over Trafalgar Square [see below p. 236].

of extending the ground without incurring any risk. At the end of the year the Association voted funds to erect gymnastic apparatus in the ground, together with two see-saws. A member came forward to pay the whole cost of £46.⁷²⁶ It was often the case that a member or a supporter would come forward to help with a one-off project, whereas Lord Brabazon had to appeal every year for people to pay regular subscriptions and the Association was always desperate for money to meet day-to-day expenses.

The Association had not given up its efforts to get the Mile End Old Town Vestry to take over the site, and in late 1887 they tried again, enlisting the help of Captain Beaumont. Instead, on 2nd January 1888, Captain Beaumont himself decided to take on the maintenance charges, and a heartfelt vote of thanks was passed to him. In 1889 the London County Council was established, and by 1890, all the gardens and playgrounds still controlled by the Association were passed over to it. The East London Cemetery recreation ground was also in the Council's care by 1892 at the latest, and at this stage its size was given as 9 acres.

Victoria Park Cemetery

The example of Victoria Park Cemetery shows how the formation of the London County Council (LCC) in 1889 facilitated the attempts of the Association to acquire one of the largest potential public spaces after years of failure without the backing of a well-funded authority.

At the first election to the new Council, 118 members had been elected, of whom the majority were Progressives (Liberals). These 118 had to elect 19 Aldermen. In that election, 18 Progressives were elected and 1 Moderate (Conservative).⁷²⁷ The single Moderate was Lord Meath. He became the first Chairman of the Parks and Open Spaces

⁷²⁶ MPGA, Minute Book 5, pp. 32-33, 37-8, 50, 73, 74.

⁷²⁷ A. Emil Davies, *The London County Council 1889-1937: A Historical Sketch* (London: The Fabian Society), pp. 5-6.

Committee, which had thirty members. He made a visit to the United States later in 1889 in order to ‘study and report on municipally maintained public gardens and open spaces in America’.⁷²⁸ He suggested on his return that ‘London required both a green belt around the metropolis and a formal parks department run by experts trained in the scientific management of open spaces.’⁷²⁹ A Parks Department was set up in 1892, under the direction of Lieut.-Col. J.J. Sexby.

The LCC had inherited the powers and responsibilities – and even the headquarters building – of the old Metropolitan Board of Works. Therefore, as Chris Waters points out, ‘[d]espite the claims made by the Progressives on behalf of the LCC’s parks policy, the groundwork for that policy had been prepared by the Metropolitan Board of Works.’⁷³⁰ All the existing commons, parks and smaller open spaces which the MBW had looked after now passed into the hands of the LCC. Like the MBW, the LCC was entitled under the Metropolitan Open Spaces Act of 1881 to take over and preserve ‘open spaces’ of various kinds and as time passed it did so. In the East End it created Wapping Recreation Ground (2 ½ acres) in 1891 and Island Gardens (2 acres) in Poplar in 1895. In addition in 1890

[a]fter a year’s discussions, and several close divisions, the...Council determined to take over for a limited period eleven gardens and playgrounds, a quarter of an acre to seven acres in extent, from the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association...These are situated mainly in crowded and poor districts where the local Vestries or District Boards had declared themselves, through poverty, unable to maintain them.⁷³¹

Just like its predecessor, the LCC had an uneasy relationship with the individual vestries, many of whom were unwilling to support projects which did not directly benefit their own residents – and electors – and on the other hand, did not like handing over control over their own small spaces to a central authority.

⁷²⁸ Reginald, Earl of Meath, *Memories of the Nineteenth Century* (London: John Murray, 1923), p. 259.

⁷²⁹ Chris Waters, ‘Progressives, Puritans and the Cultural Politics of the Council, 1889-1914’ in *Politics and the People of London: The London County Council 1889-1965*, ed. by Andrew Saint (London: Hambledon Press, 1989), p. 52.

⁷³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁷³¹ Reginald, Earl of Meath, ‘The London County Council and Open Spaces’, *New Review*, vii (1892), p. 701.

In the case of Victoria Park Cemetery the MPGA had to deal with an owner, the Rev. J.B. M. Butler, who, unlike the Beaumonts, the owners of the East London Cemetery, had few if any local ties and no record of philanthropy in the neighbourhood. He was not hostile in principle to turning the cemetery into a garden, but was unwilling to proceed without everything being legally settled. The example also well illustrates the Association's patience and refusal to give up in the face of initial difficulty, which will also been seen in the cases of St. Dunstan's, Stepney and the Main Drainage Embankment.

Victoria Park Cemetery, set up with such good intentions in 1845,⁷³² had been closed to burials in 1876. As already noted in Chapter 4, according to Lieut.-Col. Sexby, writing in 1898, it had soon deteriorated into a 'disgrace and scandal...Entrances to the ground had been burrowed from neighbouring back-yards, and it became the resort of the loafers and roughs of the East End.'⁷³³

As a large open space of 11 acres in a crowded neighbourhood, the disused cemetery was a natural target for the MPGA, and they made their first approach to the Rev. Butler, son of Charles Butler who had been one of the original founders of the cemetery, in April 1885, just as the question of the East London Cemetery was coming to a successful conclusion. It seems that Rev. Butler was in favour, but nothing more appears in the Minutes until 9th February 1886, when a letter from his solicitor states that Rev. Butler would be prepared to hand over the cemetery to

any public body who would provide for its future maintenance as a recreation ground, and would undertake the payment of a perpetual rent charge of £21 per annum, and the payment of another charge of £22 10s, which will cease in 1912.⁷³⁴

The writer goes on to say that he is now negotiating with the local authority with a view to their taking over the cemetery, so the MPGA decided to wait and see what would be the outcome of the negotiation. In April 1886 the Vestry declined, being of the opinion 'that

⁷³² See Chapter 4, pp. 173-176.

⁷³³ Sexby, *The Municipal Parks, Gardens*, p. 571.

⁷³⁴ MPGA, Minute Book 4, p. 30.

the cost of laying out the ground, of erecting fences, and of future maintenance would be so large that they would not be justified in accepting the offer made.’⁷³⁵ No progress was made until May 1887, when the Association wrote again to Rev. Butler. Again, he replied he would be happy to make the cemetery into a public garden, but only under the same conditions. In December, the Association’s Secretary went himself to discuss matters with the Bethnal Green Vestry and managed to get them to agree that if the matter of the charges could be settled and the Association would lay the ground out, the Vestry would be prepared to maintain it. But Rev. Butler would not budge. ‘I think the whole concern – advantages and disadvantages – must be transferred, or none...being Trustee for a number of persons, I am not able to act other than in the strictest and most business-like manner.’⁷³⁶ And there the matter rested for another two years. It was the formation of the London County Council in 1889 that encouraged the MPGA to make one last attempt to acquire Victoria Park Cemetery. The matter reached the Parks Committee and in October 1890, it decided that ‘the ground [i.e. Victoria Park Cemetery] should, if possible be obtained’. However, when it was brought before the whole Council, Councillor Torrance⁷³⁷ was vehemently opposed

The condition of this cemetery was a scandal to civilization, as there were close upon 100,000 bodies packed up to the very top of the ground, and he had lately seen coffins, and in some cases human bones protruding. The whole thing wanted looking into.⁷³⁸

Even so, Lord Meath must have felt confident the Council would not be deterred. But, rather than wait for it to find the necessary funds, the MPGA began a special appeal for the £3000 that would be necessary to pay for laying out the 11 acre site – by far the largest sum the Association had ever attempted to raise for any enterprise. A series of letters from Lord Meath reported progress in *The Times*. By February 4th, 1891, all but

⁷³⁵ MPGA, Minute Book 6, p. 34 quoting a letter sent by the Vestry to Rev. Butler’s solicitor.

⁷³⁶ MPGA, Minute Book 7, p. 18.

⁷³⁷ Council representative for East Islington.

⁷³⁸ *The Times*, 22 Oct 1890, p. 8.

£400 had been received or promised. It was therefore decided to make a formal offer to the LCC that the Association would lay out the cemetery. On February 18th *The Times* reported that the Parks and Open Spaces Committee of the LCC had discovered that the rent charges could be bought out for a capital sum of £1,005.⁷³⁹ This was agreed, and the offer of the MPGA was accepted. Legal matters occupied another year, until in April 1892 a Parliamentary Act gave the LCC the power to close the cemetery, ‘acquire the same and lay out the grounds for purposes of public recreation, and to maintain and preserve the same as an open space, park, or recreation ground.’⁷⁴⁰ Sadly, reported Lord Meath, at the end of the year, still more legal difficulties prevented the Association from starting the work. At last, in 1893, he was able to report that work had started on laying the ground out and that it would open early in 1894. ‘It will be a most useful recreation ground or park in the centre of the poorest part of Bethnal Green.’⁷⁴¹

In fact, the garden was finally opened by the Duke of York on 20th July 1894 and named Meath Gardens, in honour of the Earl. *The Times* devoted a whole column to the event, but gave no description whatsoever of the new garden. The *East London Advertiser* published what is more or less a word for word copy of *The Times* piece a week later. Mrs. Basil Holmes calls it ‘a most charming little park for the people of Bethnal Green.’⁷⁴² A rather indistinct photograph in her book shows that some of the old trees were kept and new ones planted. There are also some shrubs and grass, and the wide path is bordered with garden seats. According to the Association’s Twelfth Annual Report, there were also two drinking fountains, and in addition to separate playgrounds for boys and girls, with swings, see-saws and gymnastic apparatus, ‘a sandpit and mound which are the delight of the smaller children.’⁷⁴³ Lieut.-Col. Sexby praised the transformation:

⁷³⁹ *The Times*, 18 Feb 1891, p. 11.

⁷⁴⁰ *The Times*, 21 Apr 1892, p. 8.

⁷⁴¹ MPGA, Eleventh Annual Report, 1893.

⁷⁴² Holmes, *The London Burial Grounds*, p. 202.

⁷⁴³ MPGA, Twelfth Annual Report, 1894.

All who remember the gruesome state of this disused burial ground in years past, with its yawning chasms, rank grass, and mutilated tomb-stones, will recognise what a thorough transformation has taken place.⁷⁴⁴

Disused Burial Ground, St. Dunstan's, Stepney

Both of the preceding examples were cemeteries, owned by private persons.

However, by far the largest number of potential garden spaces in the East End were the disused burial grounds of the local churches, some of which were quite large. The MPGA made approaches to many incumbents, and the negotiation with the Rev. Kitto has been chosen as a typical example of the difficulties that the Association encountered. The case also illustrates how both members of the church community and local politicians in the vestry had to be involved too.

In December 1883 it was decided to approach Mr. Kitto, the Rector of St. Dunstan's, Stepney, to see if this churchyard could be made into a garden for the use of the public. It was huge, about seven acres. It was here that in 1865, William Prestoe, Head Gardener of Victoria Park, had laid out an ornamental garden in the south west portion, though no mention was made of this when the Association's Secretary visited the Rector in April 1884. Rev. Kitto explained that, with the Home Secretary's permission, people were allowed to bury in existing vaults, but that there was only about one funeral a year. At one time the ground had been open to the public and the parishioners of Mile End Old Town had contributed to the extra costs, but this expenditure had been disallowed by the government auditors. 'There is at present a gardener employed, at 25s a week, and if extra assistance was given, there was no reason why the ground could not be again thrown open to the public.'⁷⁴⁵ The Association agreed to place six seats in the churchyard and pay for an extra caretaker, as an experiment for six months, if the public were allowed in. The Rev. Kitto agreed, but said his churchwarden felt it would be impossible to allow it to be

⁷⁴⁴ Sexby, *The Municipal Parks, Gardens*, p. 574.

⁷⁴⁵ MPGA, Minute Book 1, p. 101.

turned into a playground, but should be confined to ‘old people who may like to walk or sit there in the summer. He is quite willing to allow the front gates of the churchyard to be open for this purpose from 10 to 6.’⁷⁴⁶ Mr. Kitto said that it might be possible to allow children in once proper order had been established. Two weeks later the seats were installed, a caretaker had been engaged (by Mr. Kitto, though paid for by the Association at 15s per week) and the churchyard was opened to local adults.

In June, a letter was written by Ernest Hart, Vice-chairman of the Association, to the Limehouse Board of Works, under whose jurisdiction St. Dunstan’s came, asking it to take over the ground, along with that of three other disused churchyards in the area. The arguments that he used in his attempt to convince the Board exemplify the various themes that were central to the question of the preservation of open spaces in crowded areas. He wrote that the rectors were prepared to transfer the churchyards under the Metropolitan Open Spaces Act of 1881, ‘provided that you shall dedicate them to the use and enjoyment of the public, always remembering that it is not permitted to use such grounds for the purpose of playing games.’ They obviously shared the worries the Mile End Old Town Vestry expressed regarding the East London Cemetery, above. Hart said that St. Dunstan’s was partly laid out as a garden, ‘which work is now in progress.’ He denied the frequently made argument that ‘the young people living in the neighbourhood would destroy these grounds if laid out as gardens, and by their general conduct render them totally unfit for respectable people to frequent’, citing examples where, although in very rough neighbourhoods, no such trouble had occurred. He went on to quote local medical opinion on the importance of preserving open spaces in such crowded neighbourhoods, saying that just as had happened to squares and back gardens, these disused burial grounds would be in danger of being built upon unless taken over by a public authority. He pointed out that the Medical Officer of Health to the Home Department had said that ‘disused burial grounds

⁷⁴⁶ MPGA, Minute Book 2, p. 105.

should not be disturbed, but should be turfed and planted with flowers and shrubs, and permanently kept in good order.’⁷⁴⁷ Finally, he said that the Metropolitan Board of Works had in the past contributed half the cost of the laying out, if applied to by the local board or vestry. He estimated the cost of laying out St. Dunstan’s at £1,320. The clerk of the Limehouse Board responded ‘that the Board have resolved that no steps be taken in connection with the matter referred to.’⁷⁴⁸ No reason for this decision was given in his letter.

Ernest Hart was perhaps over-confident in stating that no vandalism or misbehaviour would occur if the churchyard was opened. He did not mention a letter from the Vicar of St. James’ Ratcliff in September 1885, which described vandalism in his churchyard, where the MPGA had placed some seats:

the grown up people...hardly use them; on the other hand, it has been impossible to keep the children out, and the damage they have done has been very great in breaking trees, tiles, and in clambering over the walls...We have also had two attempts to break into the church.⁷⁴⁹

Earlier, the Barnetts had also had trouble. Their first garden had been plagued by courting couples canoodling in the shrubbery; the Wentworth Street playground, intended for the younger children, had been invaded by drunken teenagers of both sexes, and the Baker’s Row Park, although more successful in that it separated the play area from the seats for older people, had seen the flower beds and shrubs damaged by the exuberance of the children playing there.⁷⁵⁰ The middle class philanthropists may have envisaged orderly calm, but the people made their own use of the spaces provided for them.

At the October meeting of the Association, the secretary had to report that the opening of St. Dunstan’s churchyard had not been very satisfactory: he had had to make numerous complaints about the caretaker, people did not seem to be aware that they could

⁷⁴⁷ MPGA, Minute Book 2 pp. 120-121.

⁷⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 139.

⁷⁴⁹ MPGA, Minute Book 3, p. 312.

⁷⁵⁰ Alison Creedon, ‘*Only A Woman*’, pp. 82-83.

now go in, and that a notice board to this effect should be erected. The members present agreed that if they were paying for the caretaker, they should be able to appoint him. Mr. Kitto agreed, and said that his church would meet the cost of a notice board. He suggested everything should be deferred until the spring, when new arrangements could be made.⁷⁵¹

In January 1885, Lord Brabazon wrote himself to the Metropolitan Board of Works, asking for their financial support in laying out St. Dunstan's, Stepney, and St. Anne's, Limehouse, despite the refusal of Limehouse Board of Works to become involved.⁷⁵² In March he received a reply, in which the Metropolitan Board of Works declined, saying that the Limehouse Board of Works maintained that local opinion in Stepney and Limehouse was strongly opposed to laying out the churchyards in such a way.⁷⁵³ No reason is given in this letter either for this opposition, but presumably it would be on the grounds that Mr. Hart had tried to answer in June.

When funds for employing local unemployed labour became available, Lord Brabazon wrote formally to the Stepney Vestry and to Mr. Kitto, asking for their permission to go ahead with work at St. Dunstan's. In May, the secretary went to a meeting of the trustees of the hamlet of Ratcliff. As always, the problem was not so much in the immediate question of laying out the ground, but who would be responsible in the future. As Mr. Kitto said 'Nobody likes the idea of transferring it altogether, even to a local body, and yet they do not want to increase the cost to their own.'⁷⁵⁴ The Association was adamant that it could not undertake to manage the garden if there was no reasonable hope that it would eventually be taken over by someone else. The trustees of the hamlet of Ratcliff asked for a draft agreement in writing, which the Association supplied. A suggestion by the honorary secretary, Mrs. Basil Holmes, that the seats should be removed because the ground was no longer open to the public was squashed by, among others, the

⁷⁵¹ MPGA, Minute Book 2, p. 142.

⁷⁵² Ibid., p. 185.

⁷⁵³ Ibid., p. 199.

⁷⁵⁴ MPGA, Minute Book 3, p. 242.

vicar of St. George's-in-the-East, fearing, no doubt, that it would seem provocative at this stage of the negotiations. A letter in July 1885 from the rector of St. Anne's, Limehouse, which was often grouped with St. Dunstan's in letters to the Limehouse Board of Works, emphasises this need for patience:

I am sorry so much of the year has gone by before we were able to send you this answer [that they agreed to the Association's proposals], but one result of moving slowly has been an almost unanimous vote in your favour.⁷⁵⁵

The secretary had attended several meetings of the vestry, and had succeeded in changing the opinions of the members, most of whom had been originally much opposed. The rector admitted that it was now too late to do much with flowers in the churchyard, but suggested that any way seats would be better without flowers. The Association agreed that work should start as soon as possible on laying out.

Unfortunately, the agreement with St. Dunstan's was still unsigned in December, and the matter had been put in the hands of the Association's solicitors, who advised the Association not to give way. The problem was that the trustees had inserted a clause that the rector and churchwardens would have the right to close the ground at once, 'if any damage, however slight, is done to the fabric of the church.'⁷⁵⁶ Once again it was the worries of the trustees and churchwardens, who were responsible for the fabric, that ran counter to the wish of the rector. In January 1886, Lord Brabazon pointed out that this would lay the Association open to any claim for any accident, even if it had nothing to do with public access to the churchyard. He pointed out that in five other churchyards which the Association had laid out, there had never been any damage caused to the church buildings, nor had St. Paul's Cathedral itself suffered when its churchyard had been thrown open. He agreed that if any damage could be conclusively proved to be a result of negligence on the part of the Association, it would bear the cost of repair. He urged the trustees to reconsider, as

⁷⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 310.

⁷⁵⁶ MPGA, Minute Book 4, p. 24.

situated as the ground is, in the centre of a most populous district in the East of London, and considering its large size (6 or 7 acres), it could not fail to be of the greatest use and benefit if opened to the public as a garden, or rather as a small park.⁷⁵⁷

The trustees must have given way, for at the meeting of the Association on 6th April 1886, the secretary was able to report that work had begun, with 246 men being employed daily in laying out a large section of the ground where there were no tombstones, ‘pending the receipt of a faculty,’⁷⁵⁸ which unfortunately will be delayed, owing to the changes taking place in the parish.’⁷⁵⁹ When a new rector arrived later in the year, he was perfectly happy for the tombstones to be moved, but the local board refused to allow more than about half a dozen to be touched. It was therefore decided not to bother with getting a faculty, and try to change the board’s decision. The most important thing was to get the churchyard open to the public.

In early 1887, the secretary reported that Miss Wilkinson had begun the planting. A further £100 was granted to provide railings round the church, which the local authorities had insisted on. Lord Brabazon asked if the Queen would be prepared to open the churchyard on the same day she came to open the Queen’s Hall of the People’s Palace. Her daughter Princess Louise was a member of the Association, and her daughter Princess Beatrice had already agreed to open the new garden in the churchyard of Holy Trinity, Mile End,⁷⁶⁰ so it was not the forlorn hope it might otherwise have seemed. However, the Queen declined and the garden was opened on July 18th by the Duchess of Leeds. An ornamental fountain and some extra seats had been paid for by members of the Association. It was reported that there were often 1000 children in it daily, as well as

⁷⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 24.

⁷⁵⁸ A faculty is a special licence, granted by the ecclesiastical superior, e.g. the Bishop, to permit the doing of something which would otherwise be illegal. This could involve the moving of tombstones.

⁷⁵⁹ MPGA, Minute Book 4, p. 59.

⁷⁶⁰ The Vicar of Holy Trinity had sold tickets for this event, contrary to the express instructions of the secretary, but Lord Dorchester thought that no public notice should be taken of this infringement, no doubt realising that it was more important to maintain good relations with the incumbent than to enforce the instructions.

numbers of adults.⁷⁶¹ In later years St Dunstan's caretakers often won the prizes offered by the Association for the best-kept garden, though unfortunately the first winner was Mr. Liston, then in prison for receiving stolen goods.

In November 1888, Lord Meath wrote yet again to the Limehouse Board of Works, urging them to take over responsibility for St. Dunstan's, along with St. Anne's and St. Paul's, Shadwell. Limehouse Board referred it to a committee and then managed to avoid the issue by putting the responsibility for delay onto the rector of Limehouse, who, they said, did not want to transfer his churchyard. The Association decided to postpone any more discussion until the decision of the LCC, who had also been approached, was known. Meanwhile the Limehouse Board, yet again, formally refused to take over the three churchyards. The matter was finally settled in July 1890, when the LCC took them over, together with several other gardens maintained until then by the Association.

Summary

It can be seen from these three examples what difficulties the Association faced, whether dealing with private individuals as in the case of the cemeteries, or with ecclesiastics and local authorities as in the case of St Dunstan's. Mostly, the objections were made on financial grounds. Many local authorities were only concerned with the impact on the rates. These were among the poorest parishes in the capital, and the vestries and local boards were very unwilling to burden their ratepayers with costs for improvements that most of them felt were not worth the expense. As David Owen writes

From the tradesman class that dominated London vestries as a whole, opposition [to the rates] was strong and continuous. This group, like French peasants, regarded spending money for public services as wasteful and unnecessary, and their philosophy was mean and penny-pinching. Their apostles of economy were ready to cry out against each new penny on the rate, and the greatest triumph that a new vestry could record was a reduction in the rates.⁷⁶²

⁷⁶¹ MPGA, Minute Book 6, p. 61.

⁷⁶² David Owen, *The Government of Victorian London 1855-1889: The Metropolitan Board of Works, the Vestries, and the City Corporation* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press, 1982), p. 38.

There were also class issues involved. Most parishioners who were churchgoers came from the 'respectable' class, even if they were comparatively poor, and were very suspicious of the 'unrespectable', who might not know how to behave correctly in what was still a piece of ground close to a church. It was frequently the locally-elected churchwardens who were far more hostile than the vicar or rector, as in the case of St. Anne's Limehouse. They also disliked giving up local control to a central authority. The cemetery owners, on the other hand, were more relaxed about this aspect – they were, after all, once legal difficulties had been sorted out, giving up something of very little of value and were gaining the praise of men such as the Earl of Meath and, in the case of Mr. Beaumont, continuing a tradition of East End philanthropy.

Although the new parks were a fraction of the size of Victoria Park and had no pretensions to be the horticultural example that the latter was, the MPGA saw to it that they had many of the same attractions: gymnastic equipment for exercise, seats for those who merely wanted to rest in the open air, play areas for the children, and drinking fountains. The need for open spaces was generally recognised, but each proposed location brought a certain amount of local controversy in its wake. They were much closer to the crowded areas of Bethnal Green and Stepney. Once the East London Cemetery park was open, it was a local initiative by a local band that even brought music to it, just as there were band concerts in Victoria Park, and the MPGA was supportive of the move. The drive and persistence of powerful outsiders may have been needed to acquire all these spaces, but the local people then used them as they saw fit.

Both the other cemeteries considered in Chapter 4, Abney Park and City of London and Tower Hamlets, also eventually became recreation areas in the late twentieth century. They too had suffered from neglect and vandalism as they became virtually closed to new burials and they too were saved from being built on as their value as open spaces was recognised. However, modern attitudes are radically different, and both these cemeteries

are now preserved as wilderness areas, sanctuaries for wild life, with no attempt to tidy them up into 'charming little parks'.

Secular spaces

Although by the time the MPGA was active, the majority of open space (apart from Victoria Park) in the East End of London tended to be associated with churches or cemeteries, there were also some squares that had central gardens. In the first half of the nineteenth century, there had been far more of these, but even then they were already being built over. They were far smaller than the more famous West End square gardens, such as can still be found in Bloomsbury or Mayfair, but they still had value as potentially pleasant and peaceful places in which to sit. As well as the squares, there was one other major development that attracted the attention of the MPGA – the sewer embankment near the River Lea, at the easternmost boundary of the borough of Tower Hamlets. This had been built in connection with one of the main outfalls of Joseph Bazalgette's great sewage scheme and seemed to offer the possibility of creating a boulevard walkway. The following examples have been selected to show how the MPGA approached the acquisition of this type of open space and the problems that were associated with them. The value of a pressure group of influential people is clearly demonstrated, especially when dealing with central Government.

Trafalgar Square, Stepney and Carlton Square, Mile End Old Town

At the first meeting of the Association, Rev. Sidney Vatcher cited the example of Trafalgar Square, Whitehorse Lane, Stepney, as a suitable site to be transformed into a public garden and Mr Cushem, chairman of the Mile End Vestry, described how the Vestry had already compelled the owner of a small patch in the centre of the square to desist from building a row of houses across it. Cushem stated that if the new Association acquired it

and laid it out as a garden the Vestry would be likely to take it over and maintain it.⁷⁶³ It was not far from St. Dunstan's Church, and *Stanford's Library Map* shows it as having a circular central garden.⁷⁶⁴

The Association's first move, in August 1883, was to offer to place some seats in the square. However, as the Vestry could not confirm when the garden would be open to the public, the offer was withdrawn at the end of December. Mr. Vatcher was asked to urge the Vestry to get started on the work of laying out the garden as soon as possible. On 24th April 1884, Lord Brabazon wrote to the Vestry with some concrete proposals. He said the Association would provide caretakers to keep order, if the garden could be thrown open for the use of the children of the neighbourhood, as an experiment, for three months. He could not see

why those children frequenting it should not be compelled to behave in a decent and orderly manner. The Association would not propose to admit children of both sexes into the enclosure on the same day, but would admit the boys on one day, and the girls and infants on the following day, and so on, alternately.

He also proposed installing 'a few swings, giants' strides, and other gymnastic apparatus'.⁷⁶⁵

This proposition was in full accord with the original aims of the MPGA which from the beginning was anxious wherever possible to make improvements that would benefit the health and increase the enjoyment of the children. It had after all begun with the word 'Playground' in its title. Lord Brabazon had written in 1881 that he was particularly keen that 'we should ... turn our attention seriously to the question how to bring health within the reach of our poorer city populations.'⁷⁶⁶ No reply had been received from the Vestry by the meeting held on the 2nd December and the secretary was asked to follow it up.

Meanwhile, in November there was a flurry of activity about Carlton Square. This was situated on the other side of Mile End Road, north of Trafalgar Square, and *Stanford's*

⁷⁶³ MPGA, Minute Book 1, pp. 7-8.

⁷⁶⁴ See Item 3 in folder.

⁷⁶⁵ MPGA, Minute Book 2, p. 107.

⁷⁶⁶ Lord Brabazon, *Social Arrows*, p. 14.

Map shows it as having a square central garden. A letter (from whom is not stated) had been sent to Lord Brabazon on 6th November, together with a petition signed by many inhabitants around the square, protesting against the proposed use of this square for building. Showing how much overlap there was between the three ‘open space’ societies, the secretary of the Commons Preservation Society had also contacted Lord Brabazon on the subject on 11th November. ‘It would appear that the Iron Chapel, which for ten years past had occupied the centre of this garden, had been removed a few weeks previously, and it was the intention of the owner of the property to build cottages on the ground.’ Lord Brabazon was told on 8th November that if within a week he could find someone willing to come forward to ‘accept the responsibility of laying out and maintaining this open space as a public garden, that the owner would forego her previous intention.’⁷⁶⁷ He did not hesitate, the secretary was instructed to accept the offer and Lord Brabazon signed the lease on behalf of the Association, for an annual rent of 10s. Miss Wilkinson provided a plan and estimate for the laying out which amounted to £137 and the Association was ready to go ahead if the vestry would not take over the square as it stood. However, Lord Brabazon wrote to them on 12th November, explaining why he had had to act so fast without consulting them first, but asking them to consider taking the lease over. He cannot have been completely surprised when the vestry replied on 22nd January that ‘the vestry are of opinion that the ratepayers would not be likely to reap a benefit at all commensurate with costs which would be incurred in making and maintaining the place in good condition.’⁷⁶⁸ The Association would therefore have to bear the cost itself but decided to go ahead as soon as possible. Miss Orbell and Louisa Lady Goldsmid offered contributions towards the cost of a fountain for the garden. By April, it was announced that the local inhabitants had subscribed £9 16s 3d towards one year’s maintenance of the garden, and that it was nearly ready to be opened. This is the only example in the East End

⁷⁶⁷ MPGA, Minute Book 2, p. 156.

⁷⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

where local residents are recorded as directly contributing to the expense of taking over a garden. On May 4th the opening ceremony was performed by Princess Louise.⁷⁶⁹

Four years later, the clerk to the Guardians wrote to ask if the school band could play in the gardens. He said ‘the Guardians believe that a little music, given in the manner proposed, may be greatly appreciated by persons seeking recreation in the enclosure.’ Lord Meath was entirely in favour, provided that the Guardians were responsible for maintaining order and making good any damage caused by crowds coming to listen. The clerk wrote to say that the band would play, for free, one night a week. He continued

I do not think that large crowds would be attracted to the spot, and the enclosure affords an excellent position for the purpose, as on all sides it is overlooked by a very respectable class of dwelling houses, between which and the enclosure run good wide roads.⁷⁷⁰

This remark bears out the contention in the Introduction that the East End was not wholly a district of slums, and that respectability was a constant concern there.

In March 1885, a response was at last forthcoming from the Mile End Vestry on the subject of Trafalgar Square. They had unanimously decided to accept the offer of the Association to lay it out as a garden, ‘provided that the so doing is not in any way to interfere with or restrict the rights and powers of the Vestry, after it has been laid out, to deal with it under the Metropolitan Open Spaces Acts, 1877 and 1881, as they may deem expedient.’⁷⁷¹ This was accepted by the Association, as was Miss Wilkinson’s estimate of £220 to carry out the work. (It was eventually to cost £316.) In May it, too, was nearly ready. Mr. J.A. Beaumont sent £30 to pay for a fountain.

At the end of the month, the clerk to the Mile End Vestry, Millner Jutsum, embarked on a quest to obtain the Home Office’s approval for the bye-laws that the vestry

⁷⁶⁹ Her presence suggests that relations between the MPGA and the Kyrle Society were reasonably cordial, for Princess Louise had been Vice-president of the Kyrle since its formation and yet was also a member of the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association.

⁷⁷⁰ MPGA, Minute Book 9, p. 30, CLC/011/MS/11097/009, London Metropolitan Archives, London.

⁷⁷¹ MPGA, Minute Book 2, p. 223.

had made for the regulation of the garden.⁷⁷² He wrote to the Association on 29th May to say that he had tried to speed things up by going personally to the Home Office, but had no success in breaking through the bureaucratic cordon. He had been told to put his request in writing, and that the Home Secretary would be most unlikely to agree to move faster than usual. By bitter experience, he knew that the civil servant was likely to be right and therefore did not bother to make any special request. The Association decided to go ahead with the opening anyway, if the Vestry agreed, and pay for maintenance until everything was sorted out. A further visit to the Home Office by the vestry clerk was equally fruitless. He had sent the bye-laws in to the official dealing with the matter, asking for a short interview to explain, but they were smartly returned with the request that they should be sent in in the ordinary way. As the clerk wrote to Lord Brabazon 'I cannot do more in that quarter, as the officials in that department are, from my experience of them, about the most disobliging I have ever met with in the public service.'⁷⁷³ They decided that they would keep the gardens open, as the bye-laws would be valid even if no penalties could be enforced until they had received Home Office sanction. This case is unusual in that the vestry and the MPGA were on the same side against central government's inflexibility.

On 13th June 1885, the Countess of Meath (Lord Brabazon's mother), opened Trafalgar Square garden. Four lamp-posts had been erected and the garden was illuminated during the evening with great success. A fund of £25 had been started for the purpose of lighting Trafalgar Square and other gardens on fine evenings.⁷⁷⁴ However, despite the success of the lighting of Trafalgar Square, when 'crowds of people enjoyed the

⁷⁷² The vestry clerk was a paid official, sometimes a very powerful influence within a vestry, which was otherwise composed of locally elected men.

⁷⁷³ MPGA, Minute Book 3, p. 282.

⁷⁷⁴ In his speech at the opening of the East London Cemetery, Lord Brabazon was reported as saying the lighting had been on for about two hours. On the same occasion, Ernest Hart said that he had proposed the lighting of the parks at night, 'when many could enjoy that relaxation who were unable to do so in the day time.' *East London Advertiser*, 4 July 1885, p. 7. The latter point bears out the remark of Lynda Nead, see below p. 234.

novel experience, and perfect order [was] maintained,’⁷⁷⁵ the vestry refused to give permission for the lighting to continue. No reason is given in the MPGA minute for this decision, which seems strange, given that Chris Otter suggests that ‘the introduction of even modest illumination into public spaces was invariably promoted as an aid to public order.’⁷⁷⁶ Perhaps local residents around the square, unlike those in Carlton Gardens, were afraid that too many people would be attracted in. The secretary urged the Association to go ahead, risking a fine, and try to get the vestry to alter its bye-laws. However, Lord Brabazon did not agree and the lamp-posts were removed to Carlton Square, which was lit up several times and the public admitted in the warm weather with great success and with no complaints. Presumably these square gardens were sufficiently small for lighting to be effective. There is no indication that a large space, like Victoria Park, was ever lit. Although it is nowhere explicitly stated that the illumination was provided by gas, public outdoor electric lighting was still much less common at this date than it was in enclosed spaces, and one can therefore be confident that it was gas lighting that had been installed. Indeed, Chris Otter states that ‘London would remain largely gaslit until the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century.’⁷⁷⁷ Gas lighting was already widely available in London by the 1830s and 1840s and was extremely common in the streets, houses and theatres. Henry Mayhew, writing in the early 1850s, described London street markets on a Saturday night, with the ‘butchers’ gaslights streaming and fluttering in the wind, like flags of flame, [that] pour forth such a flood of light, that at a distance the atmosphere above the spot is as lurid as if the street were on fire.’⁷⁷⁸ In 1859, George Augustus Sala could describe the Whitechapel branch of Moses and Son, tailors, as having ‘seven hundred

⁷⁷⁵ MPGA, Minute Book 3, p. 300.

⁷⁷⁶ Chris Otter, *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain, 1800-1910* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 17.

⁷⁷⁷ Chris Otter, ‘Cleansing and Clarifying: Technology and Perception in Nineteenth-Century London’, *Journal of British Studies*, 43 (2004), p. 62.

⁷⁷⁸ Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, Vol. I, p. 9.

burners.’⁷⁷⁹ Regular falls in price since the beginning of the century ‘took gas consumption on a journey down the Victorian class structure,’ so that by the middle of the century its domestic use was common in middle-class living rooms, and then in middle class kitchens, and by the 1890s it had been adopted in many working-class homes.⁷⁸⁰ Thus it was not the gas lighting in itself that was particularly novel, but its use in a small public garden, where people merely came to sit in the evening. Lynda Nead suggests that ‘the widespread provision of public gas lighting extended the hours of social life of the city.’⁷⁸¹

A note in the *East London Advertiser* drew attention to another ‘error of judgement on the part of the Mile End Vestry which cannot be too quickly rectified.’ It had decided to close the gates at 8 o’clock in the evening, just at the time when most Stepney people were coming out, after a day’s work,

to get a breath of fresh air in the cool of the evening. Many of them have no gardens, and some no back yards, and it is a positive boon to such as these to be able to get into a well kept garden, and there rest for an hour or so.

If the vestry were worried that bad characters might be attracted there, they should look at Victoria Park which was open till sunset without any trouble. ‘The 8 o’clock regulation is absurd for this time of year, and must be altered.’⁷⁸² The idea of allowing the general public into spaces that had hitherto been restricted to the inhabitants of the houses surrounding the squares was still a novel one in both the West and the East End. It was inevitable that it would arouse far more worry than any idea of people congregating in a space as large as Victoria Park, where any noise or potential bad behaviour was well away from residential areas.

⁷⁷⁹ Quoted in Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 89.

⁷⁸⁰ Derek Matthews, ‘Laissez-faire and the London Gas Industry in the Nineteenth Century: Another Look’, *The Economic History Review*, 39, (1986), p. 246.

⁷⁸¹ Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon*, p. 85.

⁷⁸² *East London Advertiser*, 11 July 1885, p. 5. This re-emphasises the point made in the Introduction: that East Enders needed spaces near at hand where they could go out for a ‘breath of fresh air’ as much as access to larger open areas such as Hampstead Heath or Epping Forest.

Lord Brabazon was anxious to remain on good terms with the Mile End Vestry, as he hoped they would take over Carlton Square and the East London Cemetery as well as Trafalgar Square. He therefore decided in July that the Association would carry on paying the 16s per week for the caretaker for Trafalgar Square, although the assistant clerk, in the absence of the senior members of the vestry, had volunteered that the vestry would pay until matters could be sorted out when the surveyor returned at the beginning of August. (He was still being paid by the Association in November.) In 1890, the garden in Carlton Square came under the authority of the London County Council, but it seems that the Mile End Vestry retained control of Trafalgar Square.

Main Drainage Embankment

This was another of the very earliest projects proposed by the Association and illustrates clearly its lobbying role. The idea of providing open space was not in itself a contentious one, but there were sometimes local or even national interests that objected to a particular location. This was certainly true of the Main Drainage Embankment project. It was a completely different kind of space from anything else the Association tried to acquire in the East End. It is also the unique example when the Association enlisted the efforts of local, working class representatives to help in various ways, particularly by holding meetings in their area to promote the cause.

At the second meeting of the Association, on 6th December 1882

a conversation took place respecting suggestions that the wide embankment beneath which runs the great main sewer which discharges itself at Barking should be turned to account as a Boulevard, seated and planted with trees. The Hon. Secretaries were asked to visit and inspect the Embankment where it commences at Victoria Park.⁷⁸³

⁷⁸³ MPGA, Minute Book 1, pp. 15-16.

This would be a quite different project from the others proposed by the Association, both in type and scale. There had been a suggestion by the 1833 Select Committee on Public Walks that there should be ‘an extension and improvement of the Embankment along the River side...from Limehouse to Blackwall,’⁷⁸⁴ as there were so few places available for people to walk in the East End of London. The scheme proposed for the Main Drainage Embankment would not be beside the river, and the view was not the ‘opposite coast of Kent, and all the vessels passing up and down the river, to the Port of London’⁷⁸⁵ – far from it (see below p. 245) – but it was one of the few places where an extended promenade could be laid out and a bleak landscape feature improved.

Strangely enough, nothing more is recorded in the Minutes until the meeting on 1st July 1884. Then Isabella Gladstone, later Mrs. Basil Holmes, read out a letter from Dr. Talbot, Medical Officer of Health for the North Poplar District. She had obviously gone down to consult with him about conditions on the Embankment. Dr. Talbot’s letter informs her that there was at one time a scheme to continue the Old Ford Road on top of the Embankment, but that the scheme was quickly dropped. He also reassures her that there are no odours from the ventilators that are worse than anything to be met with in the streets. The secretary interjected to say that ‘he had last year carefully inspected a portion of this Embankment, but could detect no bad smells whatsoever,’⁷⁸⁶ thus proving, though nothing appeared in the Minutes, work by the Association on the project had continued. It was decided to ask Dr. Talbot to inspect the one-mile section between Wick Lane and Stratford High Street, and if his report was favourable, to approach the Metropolitan Board of Works with a view to constructing a boulevard on top of it.

In August Dr. Talbot reported the results of his inspection: there were no smells whatever from the ventilators, yet it would be a pity if they were left in the middle of a

⁷⁸⁴ Report from the Select Committee on Public Walks 1833, p. 6.

⁷⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁷⁸⁶ MPGA, Minute Book 2, p. 128.

promenade, though 'I am afraid it would never be a popular promenade, as it runs right through a colony of factories of a most objectionable character – printing ink works, chemical works, bone boilers, fat melters, candle makers – all of which, almost constantly, while working, give off most offensive effluvia. The view on either side, too, is anything but rural.' Nevertheless the Association decided to go ahead with their approach to the Metropolitan Board of Works, and 'Miss Hill kindly promised to ask her father to try and influence the local members of the Board of Works on the subject.'⁷⁸⁷

Miss Wilkinson and Miss Vernon went to visit the Embankment and reported that they considered it eminently suitable as a boulevard. Lord Brabazon himself had also walked the full length of it with the secretary, and as a result had written to the Metropolitan Board of Works, saying that it 'offers for some three miles in length, unexampled natural facilities for the formation, at comparatively slight expense, of a magnificent East-end of London Boulevard.' He tried to anticipate their possible objections: the danger of damage to the drainage system and the existence of 'unpleasant effluvia that at times arises from the drain.' He pointed out that the Board's existing fences were constantly being broken down by people using the Embankment as a short cut, but if it was an open public thoroughfare this would not be the case, as the almost constant presence of travellers and police would prevent bad behaviour. He said the drain would be in no more danger of malicious damage than it was when passing under a public street. He repeated that there were no bad smells. He also proposed that the Embankment should only be open to pedestrians, which would cause no damage, and that the walk might be made more pleasant by the addition of some seats and a few shrubs, which would not damage the masonry, and lower down, a few trees, placed where their roots would not interfere with the sewer.⁷⁸⁸ The Board acknowledged his letter within two days and said

⁷⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 135.

⁷⁸⁸ MPGA, Minute Book 2, pp. 144-145.

the matter had been referred to the works committee for report.⁷⁸⁹ The correspondence appeared in *The Times* on 20th November.⁷⁹⁰ The following day there was a leading article, jocular in tone, but totally supporting the views of the MPGA.⁷⁹¹ Earl Cowper brought the matter to the attention of the House of Lords on 24th November and, as *The Times* reported, received support from some of his fellow peers.⁷⁹² The Metropolitan Board of Works sent a memorandum to the Home Secretary, pointing out all the difficulties: that damage was already being caused to the hedges, railings and earthworks by the actions of trespassers and that extra costs would be incurred by providing suitable fencing for the walkway; that there would be the risk of complaints about the sewer ventilation and that two railways ran across the embankment which would have to be negotiated by any potential walkers. They suggested that the Barking Road 'is a good and wide road through fields, and is more accessible, less exposed, and now affords a better promenade than could be made of the outfall sewer embankment.'⁷⁹³

However, Mr. Simmons, of Palace-chambers, Westminster-bridge, had made enquiries and discovered that 'there exists very warm feeling in favour of the proposal to convert it into a promenade.'⁷⁹⁴ 'Men in the district' had made three proposals, all of which could be successful ploys in the lobbying campaign: 1. A public meeting at Stratford Town Hall, at which Mr. Simmons could get a popular local man to preside; 2. A meeting at the Plaistow Working Men's Club – a free room there was on offer; 3. A public meeting in Barking, where the embankment cuts through,

and the gas works men are all warm about it – (although 'trespass' notices boards are posted about, the men leap the railings and walk down the embankment to Beckton gas works, a considerable distance being saved.)

⁷⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 145.

⁷⁹⁰ *The Times*, 20 Nov 1884, p. 4.

⁷⁹¹ *The Times*, 21 Nov 1884, p. 9.

⁷⁹² *The Times*, 25 Nov 1884, p. 6.

⁷⁹³ MPGA, Minute Book 2, pp. 152-153.

⁷⁹⁴ It is not clear who Mr. Simmons was, or what precisely was his connection to the MPGA.

He suggested that the Association should remain in the background, but meet the expenses of the meetings, and get resolutions passed at the meetings asking it to take the matter up. 'This would at once give you a handle to work with, and directly on behalf of the local people concerned.' He also asked that the Association should provide 'rough and cheap copies' of various pieces of correspondence and short extracts from the newspaper pieces – 'they would be of immense service among the working men, most of whom have heard of, but have not had a chance to see, the letters, &c.'⁷⁹⁵ This is, in the context of the work of the MPGA, the only instance of such a strong sense of local democracy in action with which the Association could co-operate.

In January 1885, local meetings were being held and the local press was in favour of using the Embankment as a boulevard. Earl Cowper said that they must get a question asked in the House of Commons. On 30th March, Mr. Bryce, M.P., said he was prepared to ask a question, as there was obviously much local feeling in support of the proposal.⁷⁹⁶ The fact that the unemployed could be given work laying out the new boulevard was an added point in its favour. James Bryce, who had for five years been Liberal MP for Tower Hamlets, was chairman of the Commons Preservation Society and among the founders of the National Trust, again showing the linkages between the three main open space societies. They may have had their differences, but they could work together when it benefited the main cause. Mr. Bryce also got involved with two other cases that the Association was arguing with the Metropolitan Board of Works, one of which concerned a possible recreation ground near a proposed steam ferry terminal on the Isle of Dogs. He noted that the letters sent by the Association to every member of Parliament had 'excited some interest there.'⁷⁹⁷ Lord Brabazon said that the Association had done that on several occasions. They had also sent them copies of the first Annual Report. Lord Brabazon sent

⁷⁹⁵ MPGA, Minute Book 2, p. 164.

⁷⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 226.

⁷⁹⁷ MPGA, Minute Book 3, p. 234.

copies of his letter about the Isle of Dogs project to the Chairman of the Select Committee of the House of Commons appointed to examine the provisions of the Metropolitan Board of Works General Purposes Bill, and Mr. Bryce reported that the Select Committee looked very favourably on the Association's proposal. Although the Board refused to take any action, a clause which would allow the formation of a recreation ground was inserted in the bill at committee stage and carried by 136 votes to 56.⁷⁹⁸

In June Lord Brabazon agreed to chair a mass meeting at the Drill Hall in Stratford on the subject of the Embankment and asked as many members of the Association as possible to attend.⁷⁹⁹ It went very well, and a deputation went to the Metropolitan Board of Works, where it was well received.⁸⁰⁰ In December, Mr. Hollingsworth, honorary secretary of the local committee, stated that he had a petition ready with 1,000 signatures, but that the local committee could not afford to arrange another public meeting. The Association agreed to help with the costs, giving £5 for a meeting in Bow and Bromley (later changed to Plaistow) and £5 for a meeting in Hackney Town Hall. Lord Brabazon advised Mr. Hollingsworth to have the petition presented to the Board by one of the peers who had supported the scheme in the House of Lords.⁸⁰¹

In February 1886, Earl Cowper agreed to lead a local deputation to a meeting with the Board.⁸⁰² In April, Lord Dorchester chaired a public meeting in Stratford Town Hall, but on the same day the Metropolitan Board of Works passed by one vote the recommendation against the improvement. Lord Brabazon urged Lord Dorchester to raise the matter again in the House of Lords and also try to bring it to the attention of the House of Commons. The Board wrote to the Association, this time saying that its legal adviser

⁷⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 255.

⁷⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 259.

⁸⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 283.

⁸⁰¹ MPGA, Minute Book 4, p. 19.

⁸⁰² Ibid., p. 29.

said that it had no power to spend money on the alterations that would be necessary if the Embankment were converted into a public walkway.⁸⁰³

A year later, in January 1887, Mr. Hollingsworth wrote to Lord Brabazon that he had succeeded in persuading the new West Ham Town Council to support the boulevard scheme. They refused to send a deputation to the Metropolitan Board of Works, but their Legal Committee advised that they should try to get a short Act of Parliament which would compel the Board to give way. Mr. Hollingsworth asked Lord Brabazon to help in using his influence in both Houses. He felt that an East End Boulevard would make a wonderful commemoration of the Queen's Golden Jubilee.⁸⁰⁴ In the event it was decided to add some clauses to a bill dealing with various local affairs that was already being presented to Parliament in the current session.

In November 1887, Lord Meath (as Lord Brabazon had become earlier in the year) asked the Mayor of West Ham for a copy of the clauses he was proposing. The clauses would empower the Council to take control of the Embankment, and to make agreements with the Metropolitan Board of Works as regards the Embankment. Lord Meath then went to see the Lord Mayor of London to suggest the scheme as something suitable for his Unemployed Fund.

In March 1888 the bill passed its second reading in the House of Commons, and Mr. Hollingsworth wrote to Basil Holmes asking for names of those who might come forward to support the bill and refute the contrary evidence put forward by the Metropolitan Board of Works. He needed medical evidence, engineering evidence, and evidence of public support. He was particularly keen to find someone to counter the arguments of Sir Joseph Bazalgette who, as the original designer of the sewer system, was a powerful voice on the side of the Metropolitan Board of Works in opposition to the plan. By 9th April he had a list of 33 potential witnesses, including local MPs, local councillors,

⁸⁰³ Ibid., pp. 57-58.

⁸⁰⁴ MPGA, Minute Book 5, pp. 74-75.

local clergymen and Dr. Barnardo, but he was worried because his solicitors did not seem to have contacted any of them.⁸⁰⁵ But by the 27th the solicitors had been in touch with the Association to say that West Ham Council had decided to modify their application while the bill was in its committee stage so that they were only applying for a footpath over the Embankment, 'and not to plant it with shrubs or turn it into a promenade.'⁸⁰⁶ Part of the Embankment was already open in this way, up to 900 persons using it (it is not stated whether this is per day or per week), and the idea now was to ask the Board to allow the rest of the Embankment to be used in the same way. They had heard that the Board were going to oppose this and would therefore have to prepare their witnesses. It seemed, however, that there would be an inevitable delay before the bill came on.⁸⁰⁷ The Committee began hearing witnesses on 21st June, and went to view the Embankment for themselves on the 22nd. They were, in principle, in favour of the scheme but naturally had to hear the Board's evidence against it. Although the evidence advanced is not given, it would no doubt have been much the same as that raised in the very beginning: the expense and the risk of damage to the structure. The Committee was unconvinced and the bill received its third reading. By August/September it had become law.⁸⁰⁸ The Association voted a

cordial vote of thanks to Mr. Woodward, the Honorary Surveyor of the Association, for his kindness in having several times visited the embankment, surveyed and reported thereon, and given evidence before the Select Committee of the House; and to Mr. Hollingsworth, the Honorary Secretary of the Local Committee for promoting the scheme; it being felt that the final success of the project was mainly due to the untiring efforts of these gentlemen.⁸⁰⁹

In February 1889, the West Ham Council contacted the Association to ask if they would contribute to the considerable sum that the Council was about to spend on getting

⁸⁰⁵ MPGA, Minute Book 7, pp. 44-45.

⁸⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 54.

⁸⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 54.

⁸⁰⁸ An Act to Authorise the Mayor, Aldermen and Burgesses of the Borough of West Ham to Create Corporation Stock and for Other Purposes, West Ham Corporation (Loans), 1888 *Local and Personal*, 51-52 Vict., cxlii.c.142.

⁸⁰⁹ MPGA, Minute Book 8, p.11, CLC/011/MS/11097/008, London Metropolitan Archives, London.

the footpath ready for public use – £5,000 for fencing, road making, and other works. The Secretary was asked to find out more about what was proposed, as ‘it was felt that the Association could hardly assist in fencing the path, but might give some trees and seats.’⁸¹⁰ Unfortunately, the Council replied, while thanking the Association for their offer, they were not allowed to plant trees or place seats on the Embankment. The bill only permitted the creation of a footpath on the crown of the Embankment. They hoped that eventually they could obtain greater powers.⁸¹¹

In his tenth anniversary Annual Report of 1892, Lord Meath wrote of the Main Drainage Embankment:

After years of opposition and of difficulty, one of the earliest undertakings of your Association has been crowned with success, and a considerable portion of the Main Drainage Embankment in the neighbourhood of Stratford and Barking, E., has been turned by the West Ham Corporation, into a public footpath. It is to be regretted that the County Council insisted upon the erection of an unclimable iron railing on either side of the path, thus spoiling the appearance of the walk. Perhaps in time this railing may be permitted to disappear, and the Council will plant the sides of the embankment with flowering shrubs and trees.⁸¹²

Not quite the boulevard they had envisaged back in 1883, but at least their persistence had achieved something for the local community which it probably would not have gained without the unceasing pressure brought to bear by the Association, who had far greater powers of influence than any East End councillor.

Conclusion

Although the membership and to some extent the work of the three main open space societies of the second half of the nineteenth century overlapped, and all boasted some influential supporters, it was the MPGA that concentrated with most success on acquiring and beautifying open spaces in the East End of London and making them

⁸¹⁰ Ibid., p. 92.

⁸¹¹ Ibid., p. 98.

⁸¹² MPGA, Tenth Annual Report, 1892.

accessible to all. By the end of the century, the Earl of Meath could write ‘We would point out the vast improvement in the public feeling which has been effected during these eighteen years, although we do not wish to imply that the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association is alone responsible for the benefits arising from the modern open space movement.’ He recognised the efforts of the Kyrle Society and the Commons Preservation Society. However he was rightly proud that the MPGA ‘by its quiet, consistent work...has educated the opinion of individuals and the views of the public authorities.’⁸¹³ He pointed out that the Association now acted as a central point for enquiries and advice from open space bodies both in the British provinces and abroad.

As H.L. Malchow suggests, the strength of the MPGA partly sprang from the way in which it ‘remained above partisan politics.’ Malchow also maintains that it ‘was able to draw on social prestige and resources which the Kyrle Society could never command.’⁸¹⁴ The Commons Preservation Society ‘acquired a radical, anti-landlord tone’⁸¹⁵ because it largely attempted to preserve commons by means of campaigns against the manorial overlords through the courts. Arguably, the Kyrle Society did have powerful and prestigious supporters, including the Queen’s daughter Princess Louise, but perhaps not to the extent of the MPGA, and its open space work was much more limited in scope. Nevertheless, no doubt Charles Shaw-Lefevre, Lord Brabazon and Octavia Hill would all have agreed with Henry Lawrence’s view of changing sentiments during the nineteenth century

Access to open space was increasingly thought to be a right of all town dwellers, not just of the privileged few, and to be a benefit to social and political stability by helping to defuse social tensions.⁸¹⁶

As mentioned on p. 201 the MPGA still survives today, as does the Commons Preservation Society. The latter amalgamated with the National Footpath Preservation

⁸¹³ MPGA, Eighteenth Annual Report, 1900.

⁸¹⁴ Malchow, ‘Public Gardens and Social Action in Late Victorian London’, p. 109.

⁸¹⁵ Ibid., p. 101.

⁸¹⁶ Lawrence, ‘The Greening of the Squares of London’, p. 111.

Society in 1899, and is now officially known as the Commons, Open Spaces and Footpaths Preservation Society, abbreviated to the Open Spaces Society. The Kyrle Society, though very well known at the time, did not long survive the death of Octavia Hill, and ceased to exist in 1917. H. L. Malchow is overly dismissive of the Kyrle Society's achievements when he describes it as 'largely a clubbish group of the well intentioned, whose social vision was limited to flower boxes and musical concerts for the poor', but he is certainly right in calling the MPGA an 'ambitious, assertive and effective organization.'⁸¹⁷

In this chapter and in the many cases outlined in the Minutes which have not been discussed, it is possible to see how the ambitions that Lord Brabazon outlined in the first meeting of the MPGA were largely achieved, through the persistence of lobbying at both local and national level. He and the Association took advantage of the changed attitudes towards the provision of open space and a more enlightened attitude towards children and their need for play to find the money from philanthropic individuals to improve neglected burial grounds and squares and provide equipment that children and young people could use for healthy and enjoyable exercise. They appreciated the importance of creating pleasant places for older people to sit and managed to avoid the rather sentimental language of the Kyrle Society when describing them. They were aware of anxieties that the open spaces thus created would be misused by people who did not know how to behave according to 'respectable' standards, and therefore arranged that they would be regulated by the appointment of caretakers and other inspectors to supervise the visitors. They both used existing legislation and, with the other open space societies, were instrumental in putting forward new legislation to empower local vestries – the equivalent of modern local authorities – to take over and preserve the few open spaces left in the East End, most of which remain in existence today.

⁸¹⁷ Malchow, 'Public Gardens and Social Action in Late Victorian London', p. 109. It is therefore strange that in his article 'Gardens For the Working Class: Victorian Practical Pleasure', *Victorian Studies*, 23 (1980), 480-501, Martin Gaskell devoted several pages to Octavia Hill's work and none at all to that of the MPGA.

The MPGA came into existence and carried out its projects at a time when there was a growing desire to inquire into the real conditions under which the poor in London lived. Charles Booth, as already stated, was familiarising himself with the East End at just the time when Lord Brabazon was holding his first meetings. Mrs. Basil Holmes carried out her survey of London's Burial Grounds with as much rigour as Beatrice Potter and Clara Collett studied East End industries. But unlike Charles Booth, the members of the MPGA were not primarily concerned with information gathering – they came from a philanthropic tradition which believed in direct action. Unlike most others, who put their effort into creating improved housing, the Association concentrated on the outdoors, for they believed that a pleasant place to sit in the fresh air for older people and outdoor activity for the young could reform manners and health together. By concentrating on the spaces rather than the people as individuals, they avoided being caught up too closely in the debate over how material help should be given. Such people as they did help were helped by being paid for work done and the wages paid were carefully calculated not to compete with even the lowest of wages paid to regular workers.

Many historians have studied the problems of housing the poor in the nineteenth century. Others have considered working class pastimes and pleasures and how attempts were made by middle class reformers to 'purify' them – the temperance movement, the music hall reformers, those who sought to codify games such as football and ban such 'sports' as dog-fighting. Very few have considered the role of open spaces in poor areas such as that of the East End of London and the efforts of men such as Lord Brabazon to see that they were not lost for ever.

Conclusion

PICTURE DELETED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS

Gustave Doré: Work-A-Day London: Over London – By Rail, from *London: A Pilgrimage* (London: Grant, 1872; repr. New York: Dover Publications, 2004).

Gustave Doré's 1872 etching of the slums of London seen from a railway bridge is, for later generations, one of the most potent illustrations of nineteenth century London. It appears again and again in accounts of the poverty of the city and is often associated with the East End. But it is a drawing, even a caricature, a visual representation of Doré's reaction to what he experienced. Henry Mayhew in the 1840s told the stories of some of the street folk in his four volume series *London Labour and the London Poor*. The title was misleading, for others at the time and since came to believe that he was telling the true, unmediated stories of the whole of the London working classes. These were, apparently, poor, desperate people living in an area crowded with filthy, dilapidated houses, unable to raise themselves from their poverty and degradation without outside help. But Mayhew, too, was giving his own perspective of the people he interviewed. The images of overcrowding and poverty so powerfully evoked by Doré and Mayhew have come to be uncritically accepted as a correct portrayal of the East End of London in the nineteenth century.

Even medical men such as Drs. Southwood Smith and Gavin, who went to the East End at the time when Mayhew was carrying out his interviews to seek out the worst neighbourhoods, the potential sources of illness and fever, mentioned neat houses and pleasant gardens as well as hovels and overcrowded tenements. Later in the century there were other voices prepared to offer a more balanced view - W. Glenny Crory, Rev. Harry Jones and Walter Besant, for example - but it was the brutal novels of Arthur Morrison and the newspaper coverage of the Jack the Ripper murders that overwhelmed the milder words. Nevertheless, even in the 1880s, Mrs. Basil Holmes was not afraid to go alone into the back streets of the East End to trace the disused burial grounds that could become gardens.

This thesis has considered the East End from another perspective, using contemporary sources to show a very different version of the area from that one is used to

imagining, a view that sees green grass and bright flowerbeds as well as dreary streets of small houses. It has looked at private spaces and the much praised horticultural efforts of the working class. This topic has hardly ever been touched upon before. Stephen Constantine wrote 'the evidence overwhelmingly shows that as a recreational activity gardening was limited almost exclusively to the rural and urban elites'.⁸¹⁸ He was wrong. The evidence put forward in this thesis shows that many working class people of the East End of London were devoted to gardening – even if many of them did not have access to what Constantine would have considered a garden. A writer such as Lieut.-Col. Sexby, describing local reaction to the colourful bedding schemes in Victoria Park, recognised that in the East End 'the hard-working artisan is a bit of a horticultural critic in his way.'⁸¹⁹ No doubt further investigation of the sources used here – local newspapers and non-elite-focussed gardening magazines – would reveal more about working class gardening in other large towns and cities in the nineteenth century. Even historians of gardening more specialised than Stephen Constantine have overlooked this extremely rich source which can greatly extend our knowledge of nineteenth century gardening.

By investigating the horticultural aspects of all the open spaces of the Tower Hamlets, from Victoria Park, the three main cemeteries and the disused burial grounds to the small but colourful window boxes of the stable yards of Bethnal Green the thesis has suggested that gardening was a pastime popular with all classes, putting one in touch with nature whether gardening in a back yard or in the grandest country estate. Gardening demanded skill and patience, whether one was the owner of a stately home or a working man perfecting his flowers in an improvised greenhouse. William Eickhoff, cabinet maker from Bethnal Green, was as passionate about his fuchsias in the 1860s as the Duke of Devonshire was about his orchids in the 1830s and 1840s; the difference was that Eickhoff did everything himself whereas the Duke had Joseph Paxton to build his Great Stove and

⁸¹⁸ Constantine, 'Amateur Gardening and Popular Recreation', p. 388.

⁸¹⁹ Sexby, *The Municipal Parks, Gardens, and Open Spaces of London*, p. 553.

an army of gardeners at Chatsworth. The Duke's enthusiastic letters to Paxton survive; the only time that Eickhoff can be 'heard' is in the course of angry correspondence in his local paper.⁸²⁰ The Duke became President of the Horticultural Society (later the Royal Horticultural Society), William Eickhoff was the Chairman of the Tower Hamlets Floricultural Society. Much has been written about Chatsworth and other important Victorian gardens. Many of these 'great gardens', even if pale shadows of what they once were, survive – Chatsworth itself, Waddesdon, Trentham, Cliveden, for example – and they were often photographed. William Eickhoff's garden in Wellington Row has vanished under bricks and mortar and the record of the Tower Hamlets Floricultural Society can only be traced through newspaper and magazine reports. It is impossible to study the design of the nineteenth century East End back yard gardens, none of which were painted or photographed and none of which survive, but as this thesis has shown it is certainly possible to find out what plants would have been grown and something about the men who grew them.

Contemporary comment in the nineteenth century shows that gardening was one of the few activities to be encouraged unreservedly by rational recreationists, ministers of religion and respectable members of society as suitable for the working classes. It was believed that it would keep men out of the public houses and music halls and encourage a worthwhile, outdoor activity which could be shared with other members of the family. However, even if the middle and upper classes saw themselves as using their influence to improve the behaviour of the working classes in conformity with middle class standards, there is no doubt that the working classes themselves, as far as an interest in gardening was concerned, were in control of a pastime they would have enjoyed whether or not the rest of

⁸²⁰ Eickhoff is listed year after year as a prizewinner in the fuchsia classes in his local show, as recorded in the *East London Observer* throughout the decade. The angry correspondence appears in the *East London Observer* in October 1864. The Duke spent £100 on a single orchid in 1833 and bought a complete collection for £500 in 1835. His correspondence and diaries, which detail his enthusiasm for gardening, are preserved in the Chatsworth Settlement Trust. (see Kate Colquhoun, *A Thing In Disguise: The Visionary Life of Joseph Paxton*, pp. 62-64.)

society approved. As Peter Bailey wrote ‘however considerable the imprint of bourgeois values, clearly not all working men so touched were its passive recipients.’⁸²¹

As was discussed in Chapter 1, these were men who accepted the appellation ‘working men’, indeed described themselves as such. Patrick Joyce points out that ‘the positivist friend of labour E.S. Beesley remarked of the 1860s [that] ‘it was then that the terms ‘working man’ and ‘artisan’ came to mean not the whole of the working classes, but the ‘skilled, respectable working man’.’⁸²² The question of respectability was of immense importance in the nineteenth century. Geoffrey Best calls it ‘the great Victorian shibboleth and criterion’ and says that ‘[h]ere was the sharpest of all lines of social division: between those who were and those who were not respectable: a sharper line by far than that between rich and poor.’⁸²³ Mike J. Huggins suggests that this consolidated ‘bonds between middle and working-class respectables, in order to reform now distanced working class roughs.’⁸²⁴ Gardening was a refined pursuit, far removed from such activities as dog-fighting or prize-fights likely to be popular with the ‘roughs’. Encouraging respectability among the working classes was important to those who supported the creation of Victoria Park, as discussed in Chapter 3, for they believed that such a public space would attract all classes, thus enabling the working classes to learn from the example of the well-behaved middle classes. Questions of correct behaviour were also raised with reference to the cemeteries discussed in Chapter 4 and the churchyard gardens proposed by the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association (MPGA) discussed in Chapter 5.

The thesis has concluded that some members of the upper and middle classes, especially in the later part of the century, from religious or other motives, were ready, indeed eager, to provide help to a community they recognised as being in need, though

⁸²¹ Bailey, ‘Will the Real Bill Banks Please Stand Up?’, p. 337.

⁸²² Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class 1848-1914*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 58.

⁸²³ Geoffrey Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain 1851-75* (London: Fontana, 1979), p. 282.

⁸²⁴ Mike J. Huggins, ‘More Sinful Pleasures? Leisure, Respectability and the Male Middle Classes in Victorian England’, *Journal of Social History*, 33 (2000), p. 585. Both Best and Huggins warn against taking an over-simplistic view of ‘respectability’ – it might sometimes be more praised than actually practised.

they were not prepared to give indiscriminately. They expected reformed conduct, in line with middle class standards, from those they tried to rehouse or aid with other charity. Many did not recognise the genuine culture of the working classes of the district as anything worth respecting. But the working classes of the East End were not without initiative. They found their own uses for such open spaces as were available. Before the middle and upper class incomers took over and 'improved' the spaces, the East Enders had made use of them in their own way. They planted dahlias in 'bits of ground', hung out washing in the disused burial grounds; the workmen of the nearby factories used the Main Drainage Embankment, even when fenced off, as a short cut to their work. But when such informal spaces were gradually absorbed into controlled spaces such as the parks and playgrounds, the working classes still used these new spaces in a way that suited themselves. The upper and middle classes who created Victoria Park in the 1840s and the members of the MPGA who set up gardens and playgrounds in the 1880s, like so many other philanthropists, intended to reform and educate the poor as well as improve their lot and may have suspected that there would be resistance. The open spaces had park constables, supervisors and regulations to monitor behaviour. Nevertheless, the inhabitants of the Tower Hamlets seem not to have found the rules onerous. Victoria Park was visited by large numbers of adults and children without problems; bands gave concerts, games of cricket were played, thousands of men and boys swam in the bathing lake. A survey in 1893 found that on Whit Monday the park was open for 17 hours and was visited by 303,516 people. The next highest number visited Battersea Park, 109,783, and the third highest number went to Southwark Park, 91,074.⁸²⁵ The many speakers who addressed large crowds on potentially divisive political and religious subjects were heard without disturbances, even though debate and even heckling was sometimes fierce.⁸²⁶ The children

⁸²⁵ *London Statistics vol.3*, p. 611.

⁸²⁶ Charles Booth noted at the end of the century that 'Victoria Park is the arena for every kind of religious, political and social discussion, and, with the exception of Peckham Rye in South London, it is unlikely that

used the playgrounds provided by the MPGA, even if occasionally they were over-boisterous. No newspapers report any complaint of over-zealous control.

There was, in fact, much common ground – both literal and metaphorical – in the East End of London in the sixty years covered by this thesis. Inhabitants of all classes joined the horticultural societies, bought their plants from the nurseries, walked in Victoria Park, buried their dead in the cemeteries. There was a shared belief in the restorative powers of gardens, parks and open spaces and in their potential for doing both physical and moral good, a combination of desirable exercise and a means of improving conduct. As Patrick Joyce puts it

the poor man walking out with his family in the company of his betters will desire to comport himself in a respectable and rational manner. The classes were to meet on terms of equality, without shame or affectation...[though] it would be wrong...to consider the park as simply an elaborate disciplinary machine.⁸²⁷

The cemeteries were seen both as a healthy alternative to the overcrowded burial grounds and as a source of uplifting moral thoughts. William Taylor writes that

It was hoped by reformers involved in the garden cemetery movement that, if tombs and their epitaphs were dispersed among botanical specimens systematically labelled and arranged, the cemetery would become a means for promoting civil obedience. The graveyard would not only serve practical purposes but promote good citizenship among the masses...They were intended to be beneficial to the population as a whole, not solely to philosophers and aesthetes.⁸²⁸

The philanthropists of the later nineteenth century certainly believed that open space should be available to everyone. All the open space societies shared a conviction that those forced to live in overcrowded, noisy, dirty housing should have easy access to the peace of a public garden or park. The Metropolitan Public Gardens Association felt that to create these spaces was

first, in the interests of the poor; and second, in the general interest of the community at large...The provision of public recreation grounds is not a mere

any other open space in the world could compete with it in this respect.' Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London, Third Series, Religious Influences I* (London: Macmillan, 1902-3) p. 64.

⁸²⁷ Patrick Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City* (London: Verso, 2003), p. 222.

⁸²⁸ William M. Taylor, *The Vital Landscape: Nature and the Built Environment in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2004) pp. 179-180.

question of ornamental philanthropy, though of the purest sort, and that which blesses the largest number, and is the least abused of any – but it is also a vital question of social economy and expediency.⁸²⁹

This thesis has shown how an enthusiasm for gardening in the East End of London in the nineteenth century was much more widespread than any previous account of the area has recognised. It has shown that as well as amateur gardeners there were also nurseries, some on a large scale, and market gardens which were able to keep going until the end of the century. It has shown how important was the creation of public parks and gardens to so many, and how their provision and maintenance brought together men and women of all classes – a true example of common ground.

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⁸²⁹ Fifth Annual Report of the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association 1887: Objects, 36-42, p. 36; *ibid.*, p. 39.

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